

Deathless 216

Chapter 216 (I) Enrolled [I]

Be mindful of who you tether yourself to, son. I say this not to encourage paranoia, but for you to understand that despite your good intentions and noble heart, there will be those who see you only as an instrument. And worse yet, there will be others who think themselves noble but fall to their vices all the same. You cannot save them, especially because they don't believe their vices are vices.

I have not talked much about our cousin nobility. You might know some things, however. You might have already heard some things from the guards and our people. Besides, we Arrows are not a long and noble lineage. We earned our place through prowess and performance, and though few can dispute that, a great many noble houses claim the same achievements in their past, with some still having patriarchs and matriarchs enduring to this day, leftover champions from the wars of the founding.

Understand that though we are a Republic, we are a stratified one. And though the system, our system of governance that is, tries to enforce some level of equity so that everyone with the potential to be great might yet find that potential to be true, it is not often the case. For there are mountains of distance between which is allowed and granted to a noble scion and what meager offerings are left over for someone born to ill parentage and abandoned on the streets.

But beyond that mountain of difference, there are still leagues between the nobility as well. The eldest and greatest hold sway over the Auroral Council as well, and they often have their own games to play. They look down upon us, viewing us as someone might a half-breed child. A disgusting notion, but something that those of the traditions believe, and because they believe it, it bears weight, vile as it might seem.

So, when you enter the capital, stay true to your heart, but don't be foolish. Stay aware and remember this: your talent—your potential—is a weapon that you can use if someone wishes for you to do something you don't want to. I am here. I can be called upon, but so can several other patrons, especially the ones I told you about.

And above all, be wary of House Stormhalt. I do not think their grudge will extend to you—of everything I can accuse Havel, honorlessness is not one of them—but it is best to be prepared. Sometimes even good intentions and necessary deeds will spawn miserable consequences.

-Roland Arrow to Adam Arrow

As the voice fell silent, Shiv stared at the pin hovering before him. It glinted one more time, and he reached out to take it. He'd received an ordainment from the ceremony, but he didn't fully understand what that was.

"I just pin this to my shoulder or something?" Shiv said.

"You can pin it wherever you want, just make sure you don't lose it," the headmaster said, wagging a finger.

"Not gonna get another one if it goes missing, huh?" Shiv asked.

"What? No. We've already taken an extract of your specific mana signatures. We'll be able to replace it in a little time. It's just inconvenient, and the paperwork is incredibly annoying."

"Oh," Shiv breathed. "That's it?"

"What do you mean, 'that's it'? Ah, yes. Of course you're saying that. You didn't have to fill in any forms and coordinate with the guard about a certain identity-risk incident," the headmaster snapped. "I always have to sign off on the paperwork. Do you know how many incidents we have of students trying to get clever by hijacking the pin's mana frequencies to try and influence the academy's Idiot Loci?"

"What's that?" Shiv asked.

"Idiot—the academy's magical network. The simple, reactive mana-mind I constructed with my Psychomancy," the headmaster ranted. "It's practically the main thing people know about me."

"Yeah, well, it's hard to remember things when your brain doesn't receive oxygen for a while," Shiv replied with a shrug. "Brain damage, headmaster. It's kind of shi—uh, bad."

The headmaster did a double-take. "Brain damage—oh, you know what, just have the Biomancers look at you at some point. It'll be good for them. Dear Ascendants, Harry—he's still brain-damaged."

"Might be, headmaster." Irons nodded.

"Well. Somehow, he still seems smarter than a good portion of our current student body. I don't know if that speaks highly of him or bodes poorly for the rest of the louts. And us. Because someone has to teach the poor fools how to be Pathbearers. Isn't that a despair-inducing thought? Anyhow, don't fiddle with your pin. Do you know what happens when someone overtaxes the mana it has inside it? It explodes. Enough to blow your collarbone into your chest. And then there's the cost of a replacement pin, along with another trip to the Biomancers."

"Got it, headmaster," Shiv said. "Not much of the fiddling kind, anyway."

"Well, don't do the other stupid thing, which is trying to sell or get your pin stolen. That is a whole guard inquiry. The good news is that whoever takes the pin is usually quite easy to track down, because, well, they're holding onto the pin. Bad news is that they also have a great deal of the student's information, so that's even more paperwork—even some for you. It's an entire investigative process, and you know how frustrated I am about that already."

The headmaster yawned. He looked to his left and right and then did an awkward twirl. He faced the rest of the auditorium and held out his hands. "All witnesses present, please clap for our arriving pupil, Marcus Blood."

"Unblood," Shiv said under his breath.

"Unblood," the headmaster corrected. "Yes, yes. Would anyone like to declare their interest? Anyone at all?"

A resounding silence came from all corners of the room, mainly because there was no one in the room aside from the headmaster, Shiv, and Irons. Well, Shiv guessed the gate golems could count, but they were still on the outside, and Shiv doubted they would be offering him any kind of apprenticeship.

I mean, what would I do with them? Shiv thought to himself. Just stand around and stare at the floor? Be security? No, I mean, Marcus is partially crippled, so he's not gonna make for good security anyway. What am I thinking?

"Yeah, probably no one that's gonna—" And for the first time, Shiv received a notification through his pin. A message appeared before his eyes and pulsated with a throbbing vibration. Shiv felt that shudder, and he looked down at his pin as it briefly glowed.

Message Received: Special class privileges unlocked for TacStrat 101.

Shiv turned to Irons and raised an eyebrow. The headmaster did the same. "Really? This one? The brain-damaged boy with a body that resembles a deformed potato."

The Deathless looked down at himself and did his best to hold back his annoyance. "It's just mostly my torso. And my muscles and stuff..."

The headmaster rolled his glowing, heterochromatic eyes. "Yes, and as my dismembered sister said before the second artillery barrage turned her into trench soup, 'I would've run away if my legs hadn't deserted me first.'"

"I—" Shiv clenched his teeth, but broke. A snort of laughter escaped from him.

"Ah, I knew it," the headmaster hummed with satisfaction. "The ones with the hard and miserable lives all like the pitch-black jokes."

"He probably needs the class more than most," Irons said. "And it will likely be useful for him to get some in-field medic experience if he is to ever make the journey back home."

The headmaster regarded Shiv once more, and then he shrugged. "Oh, that's probably true. But let's not be so certain that Old Brunswick will still be our territory in a few years when the Jotun decide they're stupid enough to try another invasion. Well, boy, you're going to hate this. Captain Irons is an exceedingly reasonable man. And by exceedingly reasonable, I mean, if you perform perfectly in all your duties and tasks, he will not criticize or denigrate you. If you're expecting praise from him, well, you'll probably be my age before nothing at all happens."

Shiv caught a slight shake of Irons's head as the headmaster went on, complaining about how Captain Irons never sang his praises in all the time he'd known the man. "Anyhow, welcome to Phoenix Academy, boy. You have your lapel pin. You have your..." He regarded Shiv's student robes. "Why's there so much blood on that? What'd you do, boy?"

"Uh, my throat burst earlier. Part of my, uh, Curse."

"Your Curse has you bleed several liters of blood down your chest," the headmaster deadpanned.

"Yeah, it's, uh, it's a real nightmare when it comes to laundry." Shiv shrugged. "It's part of the reason why I got really good at, uh, surgery and biology, you know? Because I just bleed and, uh, stuff."

"How often do you bleed?" the headmaster said, a slight hint of disbelief in his voice.

"Oh, like, once a week?"

"Once a week." He chuckled. "You bleed a third of your blood once a week?"

"You can get used to it," Shiv said, lying badly. "The more you bleed, the more blood you get back. After it comes back, you know."

The headmaster blinked. Irons forced his right arm down before he could reflexively face-palm. "Well. Iiinteresting. Perhaps tell the Biomancers about your special blood regeneration skill too. Anyhow, you're going to be very popular with the rest of the student body. I look forward to whatever nicknames they throw your way. Officially, I stand against all bullying and ill-treatment on campus. Unofficially, I don't have enough time to deal with all of these matters, and the nobility will do all they can to make sure your complaints and suffering find themselves buried unless it is excessively cruel."

Shiv hesitated. "Define excessively cruel?"

"Oh, if you actually get injured or someone kills you, mental trauma counts as well." The headmaster sighed. "Mockery is one thing, but odd as your situation might be, Cursed though you are, you are a student of my academy, and for one student to damage another is an insult to my institution. When that happens, you do not come to me. I will find you, and then I will find them, and then there will be no more discussion about the matter."

At that, Shiv saw both of the headmaster's eyes come afire with kindling mana.

Something tells me I won't enjoy fighting this guy, Shiv thought to himself. He didn't know why, but the headmaster seemed a trickster and a deceiver in combat, and between his Divination and Psychomancy... It was a bit hard for Shiv to hurt someone that might never show up for the actual fight at all.

"Well then, I have stood as secondary witness. Captain Irons, thank you for resolving this situation. Mysteriously resurrected student, I bid you welcome, and if you have any questions, simply direct it into your pin. It will answer everything I can't and don't care to."

With that, the headmaster disappeared. Instead of it being like a normal teleportation with pressure, he simply burst like he was a soap bubble, vanishing from sight thereafter.

"Does he do that a lot?" Shiv asked.

"More than I would prefer," Irons replied.

"I'm still technically here," the headmaster's voice echoed telepathically. "And in case either of you is planning to mouth off to me, do not. I might not be able to hear your words, but I can read your notes rippling from your minds, and I do not appreciate them. They will hurt my feelings."

And with that, the Legendary-Tier headmaster fell quiet again.

"Well, he seems fun," Shiv said under his breath.

"It's a bit of a game to him," Irons explained. "Part of it is his personality. The other part is performance." He turned and fixed Shiv with a hard glare. "Do not underestimate him. Do not get careless in his vicinity. He already suspects you of a few things, but he will not pry, not unless it affects the academy directly."

"If he suspects me, then why isn't he gonna do anything?"

"Because you are not nearly the only student with dangerous secrets. Dangerous secrets also mean lucrative Pathbearers and potential allies for the future. That, and the academy is a subversive battleground of another kind. Nobility actively recruiting their own vassals and assets against each other. The houses are arraying their own forces, and between the cracks, there are also subversive elements like Aviary and revolutionary groups fomenting."

The Deathless tried to remember where he had heard that before. "Fermenting?"

"No. Building up. Gathering."

"Ah."

Shiv took all that in. His incredulity only grew. "So then, why hasn't the Prismatic Guard or the Ascendants come down to stamp them out?"

"Because the academy grounds also serve as a hunting tool. No one here engages in heated conflict, at least not in most circumstances." He briefly frowned at Shiv, and the Deathless simply folded his arms.

"Look, I spared you guys from a bloodbath, something that would have probably killed a few thousand students at the very least if it ended up spiraling the wrong way."

"And from how you described it, it barely didn't." There was a bit of judgment in Irons's voice.

"Best I could do for now," Shiv said.

"Yes, and I'm going to see that is improved however I can."

"Is that why I'm going to take the same class Adam did?" Shiv asked.

"That, and it would give us an excuse to work together and for me to assign you additional tasks. Especially if you are to have an alibi for operating in odd places beyond campus grounds."

"Oh yeah, the thing with Melissa. Listen, we can get started on that as soon as you get some details. The only other thing I really want to do is check in my dorm." Shiv paused. "Do I actually get a dorm or something? How does this work?"

"If there's a room in one of the halls open, you will see it assigned to you. However, since you have arrived late, Marcus Unblood's prior living arrangements might have been shuffled or adjusted."

"So, you're saying I'm homeless? Well, this takes me back to the time I was eight."

"Eight? You were homeless when you were eight?"

“Yeah. Wasn’t all bad if you knew which dumpsters—forget it. I’ll figure something—”

Irons shook his head. "Check your pin. It is connected to the academy’s network for information. That’s what it is mainly for.”

“The Idiot Loci thing?”

“Only certain students and the headmaster call it that,” Irons grumbled.

Shiv regarded his pin with interest. As he focused on it, a set of notifications appeared before his vision. The same set that materialized when he first arrived on campus grounds. Instead of being an unknown guest, however, he was now a fully fledged First-Year. He had voting privileges, and they were connected to various events.

Potential speakers and friends could be scheduled via the academy's budget, and then there was a special section for on-campus options. A single bullet point remained beneath the options, and he felt a tickling sensation in the back of his mind as he kept his gaze locked to it. It expanded into a subheading titled Housing.

As he kept his gaze fixed on that as well, a descending bar filled with options plunged down to the bottom of his vision. As he looked down, he found the bar to be scrollable. There were over eight options he could select from, a lot of different dorm rooms with their amenities listed behind them. One bed, one workstation, and a shared restroom were the norm. All except for one choice. That one seemed to lack a proper workstation, but the bathroom wasn't shared.

Welcome, Marcus Unblood (First Year Adept)

Votes

- Next Week's Weather Cycle

- Potential Events

On-Campus Amenities:

- Housing (8)

Manticore (1 Bed; 1 Shared Bath; 1 Workstation)

Dragon (1 Bed; 1 Shared Bath; 1 Workstation)

Griffon (1 Bed; 1 Shared Bath; 1 Workstation)

Mermaid (1 Bed; 1 Shared Bath; 1 Workstation)

Unicorn (1 Bed; 1 Shared Bath; 1 Workstation)

Hydra (1 Bed; 1 Shared Bath; 1 Workstation)

Kraken (1 Bed; 1 Shared Bath; 1 Workstation)

Carrot (1 Bed; 1 Bath)

Chapter 217 (I) Enrolled [II]

The best cover identities allow you to be adaptable, for there will be unforeseen circumstances in your future that you will have to adjust your backstory to overcome.

The most common pitfall some little birds stumble into is when they select a region their cover is from. They spend so much effort developing the history for themselves, such as creating a false family lineage. They seed so many pieces of information that their past looks real, and then they are faced with a local, and some minute things simply stop adding up. You speak the language, but not the lingo. You melt into your role and profession, but part of you cannot integrate with the culture. And then come the questions, "Oh, and which part of Diego are you from? Really, you did that 30 years ago? My father was in charge of the Debrinch Torrent at Huaqing Station in High Harbor as well. Maybe you've met him before."

These are very common issues, but these are issues that are so often ignored in the face of so-called greater difficulties. But it is in the small things that our covers thrive or sustain erosion.

And for those of our birdies who think they're going to be clever by choosing to be an orphan or someone alienated from society, well, how are you supposed to get another to trust you when you have no past, even within their culture? People don't even need to be suspicious of you for doors to be closed, and people merely need to doubt who you're pretending to be for everything to collapse.

Tradecraft is a very fragile thing.

And the worst covers of all are the ones you know in breadth, but fail to grasp at the depth. A life is not a collection of major events. A life is everything your cover has done. And if you treat your masquerade like a resume, then ultimately it will have the durability of paper, and someone will rip through.

-The Mallard, Aviary Instructor

217 (I)

Enrolled [II]

Strider of the Unbending Path 163 > 164

The Creeping Void 115 > 117

Strider of the Unbending Path continued to be one of Shiv's most indispensable skills. It didn't matter if it was in combat or if he just wanted to get away from someone. Being able to freeze the flow of chronology, even for a brief second, allowed him to slip from crowd to crowd and reposition.

The massive wards projected by the academy meant he couldn't remain within the time-frozen state indefinitely. Perhaps he could try to contend with the wards using his Shapeless Tides. But if he damaged it in any way, that would probably reveal his presence more than anything else he could do. After all, there were only so many things, or people, that could stop an academy-spanning set of wards dead.

After Shiv's third time stop, he leaped down into a trench leading into a nearby building. He thought he was standing in front of the Manticore dorm, judging from the emblem plastered over its front door. He was going pretty fast, so he didn't get a good chance to have a look, but that didn't matter. He wasn't heading for the dorm itself. Instead, he was going for one of Phoenix Academy's greatest conveniences: its on-campus jump network.

He landed hard in the trench and cracked a few of the boards. He winced but didn't stop. Shiv slipped between two students speaking to each other, knocking a book out of one of her hands. He caught it before it could hit the ground and tossed it back to her.

"Sorry," he said, "being pursued by a bunch of people I definitely don't really know. Don't tell them I came this way."

The student blinked at him with wide eyes and an open mouth. He didn't wait for her to respond. He kept running.

The trench curved left, veering under Manticore Dorm. He saw a few other students coming from that direction, and one of them staggered to a halt, looking at him with concern. He was a short, human male

with chocolate-colored skin, white hair, and a pair of large, round spectacles. Unlike the other students, his robes were the purest white, and he had a silver patch over his shoulder, identifying him as Adept-Medicus John Brambly.

"Whoa, are you okay?" he said aloud as Shiv zipped by him.

"Yeah, just a throat abscess."

"It's a lot of blood for a throat abscess," the medicus called. "You should go to the—"

"Later," Shiv cut him off. Then Shiv saw his path ahead fork in two different directions, and he briefly stumbled. "Hey, uh, Adept John, which way to the jump station?"

"To your left," John said, looking at Shiv uncertainly.

"Thanks a lot." The Deathless tore off in a controlled sprint down the left hall. Soon, he began to feel waves of pressure building in the air, and even more students headed his way. "Yup, that's a jump station, alright."

He practically somersaulted over two goblin students and through a set of wide metal doors and nearly barreled an automaton student over, eliciting a surprised trill in response. Shiv apologized and grunted as he dodged members of the student body as if they were an obstacle course.

"Coming through! Coming through! Just a bit of a nosebleed running down my chest, don't mind me! Coming through!" Shiv called aloud. Heads whipped as he passed by, trying to track his movements. Shiv forced himself to slow down just so he could maintain their suspension of disbelief. The honest truth was, he was moving fast even for an Adept, but people had a tendency to exaggerate or misremember things. At least that was what he was telling himself at that moment.

Right then, he just needed to get away from this area. He'd had enough for a day. He'd already stopped a mass casualty event on campus, though no one would ever know, and he didn't want to deal with Marcus Unblood's personal problems as dessert. As he shimmied past the walls of an antechamber, he found a small line forming along the right side of the room. From the left came another flow of students departing the teleportation station.

The Deathless briefly thought about just running for Carrot on foot, but dissented against it when he saw there was no Prismatic Guard here. That meant he could take advantage of a few things. Once more, he froze time, and it took him a half-second to get to the very front of the group.

When he resumed time once more, a student standing behind him briefly flinched, surprised at Shiv's sudden appearance. "Hey, you alright?" Shiv said, reaching out with a hand to steady the other student.

She was a very tall, gangly elf, and she clutched a set of books tight to her chest. One of them was titled Practical Dimensionals and Dimensionality. This one was a Jump Mage in training. What she wasn't, however, was a Chronomancer, and she probably wasn't prepared for all the bullshit Shiv was about to throw her way either. "You look a little light-headed. You nearly tumbled over for a second. You should probably go to the Biomancers and get checked out."

"I should?" she murmured.

"Yeah, called out to you several times earlier. Just kind of stared ahead blankly." Suddenly, she looked very concerned. "Anyway, get checked out." Shiv walked forward, successfully deflecting another student asking him where he came from through the powers of blatant lies and induced self-doubt.

Deception 37 > 38

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As soon as he stepped onto the platform where that shimmering sphere of Dimensionality waited, a notification appeared before his eyes, and a much smaller constellation of jump stations materialized as well. Immediately, he selected his stop, Carrot, and with that, he waited. A second later, the elven jump mage followed.

"Was I really spacing out?" she asked, sounding worried.

"Yeah," Shiv said, tapping his foot and waiting for the transition to follow. Once it did, he would be home free, at least for a while.

The elven student bit her lip and looked down at the ground. "Then the migraines might be returning soon as well."

"Migraines?" Shiv asked.

"I had brain lesions from a plague in my hometown," she said, coughing awkwardly. "Biomancers said they healed, but I knew something didn't feel right."

And now Shiv felt like shit. He just wanted to induce some doubt. He didn't want the girl to actually suffer some kind of health anxiety. Well, what the hells did we think was going to happen, Shiv chided himself. You lie to someone hard enough, and they believe you. They're going to start questioning things. You need to come up with a better set of lies for situations like this.

Just then, Shiv heard a loud bellow coming from the trenches beyond the room. "Marcus Unblood! We're going to kill you!"

The student Jump Mage flinched at the sheer rage in the voice. Shiv just sighed.

"Who was that?" the elf stammered, betraying a hint of fear.

"Stupid drama," Shiv replied nonchalantly. "Some felling idiot couldn't keep it in his pants. Got a girl pregnant. Now he's trying to get away from her."

"Oh, how horribl—"

Jump Initiated - Carrot Station

The teleportation process began. The dimensional sphere above them swelled wide and swallowed Shiv and the elven student. Whatever else she had to say was cut off as they were both projected toward their destination.

Shiv didn't travel for very long. He was squeezed across what felt like a narrow tunnel for around three seconds before he suddenly arrived at another jump station. This time, he was utterly alone, and the room he found himself in was sparse and clean. He also couldn't hear any music in the distance nor sense any vitality signatures within a five-meter radius. As he looked up, however, he could see glinting signs of life force dotting all the levels above him. If he had to guess, there were a good few hundred people inside the dorm right now. What it didn't have, though, were people trying to pursue him.

And Shiv let out a heavy sigh as what remained of his tension slid free from his body.

"Looks like I got away from that," Shiv muttered, and then he slammed his jaw shut. He eyed the jump station warily, and immediately, he fled from the room. A set of heavy steel doors opened before him, revealing a long hallway as clean as the room behind him.

The layout of the architecture right outside the Carrot jump station was much the same as the Manticore counterpart. He found himself back in wood-paneled trenches again, but this time he went the other way, taking the path to the right instead of the left. That's how he found himself in the true basement of the Carrot Dorm. He approached a set of glass-paneled doors, and on them were a mess of stickers, pictures, doodles seemingly depicting Ascendants, profane marker scribbles, and a half-smearing "you can be whoever you set out to be" in the upper right corner.

As he drew close, he felt his pin briefly pulse, and the door swung open, granting him entry. The lights inside were dim and cast from small orbs of Pyromancy mana. Shiv looked up and thought he could see some hydro dispensers as well. They were modest hydro dispensers compared to the ones at the Swan-Eating Toad. They looked like little studs with holes on the side. Far less conspicuous than the massive hose-shaped things pointing down like spikes from the roof of the restaurant.

Shiv pulled up his interface again and focused on his housing options. In all his excitement earlier, he forgot to double-check which room he was in, and his gaze lingered. It expanded before him. B-4-0-0-2. "Alright," Shiv said, "time to figure out which B I'm in."

He explored the bottom of Carrot and soon found a very helpful map showcasing the building's interior pinned against the wall. Presently, he was on B-2, and this section of the building was dedicated to a central charging station that occupied 80% of the floor, while the rest were sound- and light-warded study halls, along with one public restroom.

Shiv found the stairs soon thereafter, but also noted that there was a mana elevator as well. As he got there, he was surprised to see that the elevator wasn't actually one that used a platform, but simply had a low-gravity field projected upward from the very bottom. Amused by the novelty, Shiv decided to take a hop over the edge, and he felt his body go weightless. "It feels a little bit like Gravitic Wrestler, but a lot weaker."

He swam downward, passing another level and finally getting to B4. He counted another level underneath B4, and it was totally dark. He wondered what that was for, but decided to explore it another day. Right now, all he wanted to do was get checked in, maybe sit in his chair for a while, and stare at the wall to decompress before touching base with Adam and the others.

His dorm room wasn't particularly hard to find. He simply needed to follow the numbers. However, as he walked along the hall, the unmistakable smell of onions and potatoes called to him. As Shiv rounded a corner, he looked to his right and realized there was a communal kitchen here. Within, he saw two students with their backs turned to him. They both had robes with Longinus the Traveler emblazoned on the backside. Shiv saw the snake-like Ascendant holding a lance in one hand and hefting a beer high in the other.

It was only after noticing that, however, that he realized one of the students was a bit odd as well. They were far too large to be human, bigger than Shiv by twice over and rounder than most orcs. Their skin

was green, and they had these little tube nubs that stuck out from where their ears should be. Shiv stared as the giant, burly student hummed a low tune that sounded like an earthquake trying to sing, carving away at an onion without suffering any deleterious effects.

Is that an ogre? Shiv thought to himself.

"Done?" the other student asked. It extended a mechanical hand, and its sleek, three-digit hand whirred as it gestured for the ogre to hand over its completed chopped pieces. A cleanly shorn mess of onion bits was promptly offered over, and Shiv's guts nearly tangled in outrage. That was some of the worst cutting he'd ever seen. The Deathless did everything he could to not let this moment color his opinion about all ogres in the future. He failed.

At least I know they have a kitchen now, he thought to himself. He retreated from the scene quietly and, after a minute more of searching, found his door. As he came before it, he saw that it was made out of some kind of maple, perhaps. It was a soft and brown wood. There were some mithril supports lining its interior. He could feel that with his Biomancy. They were like rods riven through a body, things he couldn't feel but sensed by absence alone. Beneath the doorknob, there was also a slight glimmer of violet mana.

Shiv stared at the door, wondering how he was supposed to open it, and on instinct, he reached out. As soon as he did, his pin flickered twice upon his lapel, and the door clicked open, the lock disengaging. As he stepped into his room, Shiv felt the faintest of pressures wash over him. He guessed the lock also constituted several very basic wards, and with how much mithril was running through the Capitol's buildings and even within its academy, he had little doubt that there was probably an integrated alarm system active.

More importantly, if it could detect his mana signature, or at least his Perfect Semblance's mana signature, then it probably could do the same to other students as well. That likely helped with petty crimes such as burglary or instances of someone sneaking in to copy homework, if that stuff was actually what a cheating student did.

As Shiv squeezed down the narrow hall leading into his room, he shut the door behind him, and only when it clicked did he feel a sense of triumph.

He had escaped. He had survived. Another day of madness, and to think this began with him still in a prison. Telling the System to eat his shit one more time, Shiv surveyed his on-campus living arrangements and immediately found himself missing Weave once more.

To his left was a bathroom. It wasn't shared, but it was small, barely large enough to fit Shiv. The sink and the toilet were a little too close together, and the shower came with a small bathtub. It wasn't long enough for Shiv to lie down in, but he could definitely squat inside it. This made him wonder what kind of living arrangements the ogre student had, if they needed to apply for special housing or something.

"Well, it's better than my shithole apartment back on Blackedge," Shiv muttered to himself. "The only water I could get there was harvested from other places."

He left the bathroom door open because he was going to head in after a while. Marcus Unblood's robes needed cleaning, and so did Shiv himself. He'd been in active combat for so long that blood, dried blood, giblets of flesh, and leftover grime were beginning to cling to him like crusting mud.

Briefly, he regarded the rest of the room proper. There was a small chair placed in front of a wooden table. Shiv wondered if that seat could take his weight. That worry in consideration extended to the bed. It was made of wood too, with white linen sheets and plump brown pillows. But it was definitely smaller and a lot less durable than the first bed he got at Weave.

And I destroyed that thing, Shiv thought to himself. Well, Uva and I did. That was awesome... Godsdammit, I hope she's okay... They'd badly deformed her bed, made from reinforced metal as well. Good thing I don't need to sleep that much anymore, as a Legend.

Frankly, it didn't feel like he needed to sleep at all for physical recovery. Mentally, however, he was somewhat past exhausted and a kilometer beyond frustrated. Maybe a half-hour nap would do him some good.

Chapter 217 (II) Enrolled [II]

Shiv sighed and peeled the robes off his body. The front end was painted deep red and soaked all the way through. Shiv held it up before him as he wandered into the bathroom. The interior was dim, but after a few seconds it brightened, as if the room sensed his presence. Shiv looked up and saw another small orb charged with Pyromancy lighting the space. Shiv frowned. He wondered if it was possible to tap into the orb to amplify its mana and use it as a weapon. He wouldn't put it beyond the academy.

This was, after all, a place of Pathbearers. And having the lights also serve as an integrated defense system was an ingenious idea. Then, as he thought about it a little further, he decided it was probably a stupid idea and likely impossible. It would be more hazardous than defensive. With all the reckless students on campus, it was more likely one of them would burn their own eyes out or something, necessitating an unnecessary trip to the Biomancers after.

He curled one of his mana hydra's heads through the front side of his borrowed robes and peeled the blood away. In the briefest of instances and with the lightest of efforts, he managed to strip the red from the black. But that didn't mean the robes were clean at all. No, they were torn in several places, with all manner of dirt, soot, and bits of gravel embedded in the fabric. He looked down at the sink next to him, and he twisted the handle at the top of the faucet.

Water began to flow, and he followed a faint trickle of Hydromancy mana leading into the jetting metal dispenser. He watched as the water trickled on for a few moments and wondered if Cullywier could transport him across the university using this infrastructure as well. It was something he needed to ask

the fairy later, when he had a chance. For now, he placed his robes within the basin and began to scrub and squeeze.

He was used to washing his own clothes, but it had been a while since he'd done it. Having a self-repairing set that kept getting shredded, while putting on armors made from his very own bones, made cleaning a redundancy or an activity of simplicity. As he washed his robes, another sigh escaped him, this one more tired and mournful. He thought back to his brief moment of freedom, down in the Umbral Wilderness, how he swam through the glistening rivers filled with bioluminescent colors, how he gathered the weeds there and discovered their capacity to serve as ingredients.

He missed it, he craved it, and even though he had some measure of freedom back, it still felt stifling. Becoming a student at Phoenix Academy was something he had dreamed about before, but he'd had a taste of what it meant to be truly free, to be a Pathbearer untethered to a master or the whims of fate. It was like going from being a free-flying bird to one that existed in a larger cage than after its birth.

We'll get that back, he told himself. We'll get everything back. Find Uva and the others again. We'll finish saving what's left of Blackedge, deal with this Udraal bullshit, the Ascendants, and then... then I get to live my life. I don't give a godsdamn what you throw at me, System, I'm gonna live my life, and I'm gonna find my way. I'm going to live my way. I'm going to grow beyond your violence and force you to give me peace when I ask for it.

He gritted his teeth as he finished his declaration and ignored that wary feeling in his stomach, as if he had tempted fate a bit too much. By this point, it didn't matter. The System was going to come for him one way or another. He could only get more powerful, get more prepared, get wiser, increase his knowledge. It was the only thing that could protect him from an ugly end.

As he finished wringing the filth and detritus out of his robes, he began to turn and squeeze. He turned and wrung the fabric in his hands, squeezing out every bit of water it had lodged between its fibers. He used his Hydromancy, plucking out what he couldn't release through twisting alone. And after a few seconds, the robe was as dry as it had ever been. He closed the door to his left and hung it on one of the hooks there. He hummed and saw there was a complimentary set of towels offered already.

That was thoughtful, he thought, but maybe it was just a basic amenity. Not all students there were rich, and supposedly this dorm was specifically for the non-nobles.

It was then that Shiv realized he had no money on him, and he hadn't thought of spending money in quite some time. Frankly, everything he needed he took from someone he killed or one of his allies made for him. Now that he was in civilized society, he might encounter some situations that required him to spend mithril.

Part of Shiv cringed. He didn't like the idea of spending mithril, mainly because he never had much to begin with. And with all the skills he had, stealing was infinitely easier. So was simply killing himself, and making do with the parts harvested from his body. Can't be doing that in the open anymore either, Shiv realized.

He mulled over more thoughts as he stepped into the shower. Shiv removed his Voidmantid armor and his mask, placing them into his cape. He thought about the breakout, about all that had happened. He thought about how the System hadn't exposed him again, how he was still surprised that no Ascendant or Prismatic Guard presence descended upon the campus in search of the Legendary-Tier escapees after the battle. He thought about the Neath, about Irons, about everything they had to do in the future.

One thing he definitely didn't think about was Udraal. He didn't want to deal with that. He never wanted to deal with that. But despite this, Shiv knew what was coming. His maker had plans, and the game he was playing was an ugly one. Worse yet, Shiv couldn't quite get his measure.

He was a monster born of action instead of being born of bestial nature, but also was neither hateful nor rageful. He didn't seem to be affected by anything emotionally. He just treated people like things, and that was what Shiv was to him. A thing. That was what Shiv's parents were to him as well. And Adam's parents. And Adam, as well as his sister. And everything in the world.

Valor, Shiv thought to himself, what the hell happened to make your son like this? Or was this how he always was? Something you can't remember? And as soon as Shiv thought of his old friend, feeling lonely in this room, he wondered how Valor was doing. How Uva and everyone else were doing on Blackedge. He even thought about Roland. He washed himself, scrubbing away at the fetid accumulation that was clinging to his body. Just hold on. I'm coming to get you. I'll find a way. I'll find a way soon. I promise.

Something hit him in the side of the head.

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It wasn't painful, but it did make him flinch. Shiv turned hard. He spun within the basin, and the water around him splashed. His Last Morsel appeared in his right hand, and the Deathless growled, prepared to fling himself at his ambushers and rip the limb from them. Can't even felling shower in peace.

His vicious snarl died as he rolled his eyes and let out a tired scoff in the face of his "enemies."

"Really? This is how you decide to reach out? Right now? While I'm cleaning my ass?"

A dimensional rift splayed wide before him, blocking his sight over the tiled walls. Down the pathway, Adam laughed. The Gate Lord's merriment was overwhelming, and he practically couldn't stop himself from doubling over. His vector wings glimmered bright as he drew closer. Behind him, a small cohort of orcs followed, Helix, Whisper, and Tequila among them all. Back on the other side of the pathway, Mortar grinned as well, waving with his large metallic fingers.

"When else?" Adam asked. His face was red in that open visor, and he looked like he was on the verge of collapsing into laughter once more. "You're finally out of the fire."

"Why?" Shiv said. "What's got you so tickled?"

"We did a whole funeral for him—" Adam began before he finally broke down again, almost collapsing to his knees.

And then Shiv realized, and he couldn't help it. He chuckled too. "Yeah... I thought we were taking advantage of some poor, unfortunately Cursed orphan who fell heroically in battle. It turns out, he's a poor, cursed orphan who's hated by everyone from his hometown, and apparently didn't believe in using protection."

"That's two girls now," Adam breathed. His eyes were wide as saucers. "Two!"

"Technically one," Shiv said with a deadpan grunt. "The other's a corpse in a freezer along with the infant she carried."

And that made Adam wince. "Right. But still, this is ridiculous. I mean, does he have any social skills?"

"None that passed muster," Shiv said. "But then again, neither do any of the girls, I think. So, I don't know, maybe they found him endearing? He went off in the woods and picked them a bunch of flowers or something? I don't know, Adam. I have no idea why this guy did what he did and how he managed to get to doing what he did."

"And the best part about it is that it's now your problem." Adam started laughing again, and Shiv just glared.

"I want to strip the skin from that liaison's ass if I ever see him again. He really neglected a lot of information when he dumped Marcus's corpse right in front of me."

"A lot," Adam concurred. The Gate Lord coughed and mastered himself. "Anyhow, where's your pin? Show it to me."

Shiv pulled back the curtain and picked it up from where he had left it on the toilet lid. As he turned, Adam held up a bluish pin. It too was built on mana, and Shiv briefly squinted at it. "How'd you get one of those? Is that left over from your academy days?"

"No, my pin's still back on Blackedge. I took it off the moment I got back home." A slightly sour expression crawled over Adam's face. "I don't think I will be seeing that pin again. However, this one, this one is meant for on-campus security. It's assigned to one Hector Boulevard."

"You get a false identity too?" Shiv asked.

"Not exactly. Hector Boulevard is an actual security officer on campus. However, he is currently on leave, an extended leave, and through a series of fortuitous circumstances, his pin ended up with Professor Merriemel."

"Ah, I got it," Shiv said. "Got a back door into the Academy's network, huh?"

"Yes, and immediate access. Greet me once more." Adam sighed. A string of mana formed between Shiv's pin and the one Adam held, and soon the syncing process was complete. "Good. Now I'll be able to message you wherever you are."

The Deathless folded his arms, but immediately continued washing, rubbing more of the grime off his body. Adam shot him a look, but Shiv didn't stop. "Why, I gotta clean myself at some point, and you decided to interrupt me. I'm not covering up or stopping on your account."

"Oh, I don't mind," Adam said with an air of nonchalance.

"Yeah, sure you don't," Shiv replied. "That's why you shot me in the head just now."

"It was simply the best time."

"Best time's when I was naked?" Shiv asked.

"Are you shy?" Adam asked. "Oh, wait, no. The question is, did you somehow develop shyness in the few months we've known each other? Because I do recall you finding interesting ways to torture me early on."

"Hey, I didn't know how good your Awareness was then. And secondarily, you could have gone on a longer walk."

"I could have gone on a longer walk? Truly? That's your defense?" Adam nodded with incredulity. "You hear this one?" He gestured at Shiv, and the orcs smirked. All of them except Helix.

"Are you two jousting or trying to perform a pre-mating ritual?" the Biomancer spat derisively. "Must you always peck at each other like roosters in heat?"

Both Adam and Shiv glared at him. "It's called banter," Shiv said. "And everyone does it, especially friends."

"Ah, yes, friends," the orc asked with a nasal hiss. "I forgot, I speak this way to other orcs all the time."

"Don't bullshit them, Helix," Mortar called from the back. "You have no friends. None of us likes you either. That's why no one banterers with you."

The other orcs, Shiv, and Adam laughed again. Helix scowled even harder, crossing his arms.

"It's normal," Adam added. "Besides, there's nothing here either of us hasn't seen before."

The orc seemed to accept that as an answer, and so he rolled his eyes instead of saying anything else. Tequila, meanwhile, was actively staring down, leaning his head out from the dimensional rift. Shiv looked back at him with a raised eyebrow. "Can I help you, Tequila?"

"Yeah, don't you ever find it ugly?"

"Find it ugly?" Shiv said politely.

"It looks like a worm that doesn't know how to grow hair on the rest of its body. A Cursed worm."

"I, uh..." Shiv really didn't want to have this conversation with the orc, so he simply shrugged. "No, man, I just, I don't think about it that much. Listen, lean back, you're starting to creep me out."

The former detective scoffed. "Oh, humans are so awkward about their bodies."

Shiv shook his head and went back to speaking to Adam. "So, aside from connecting your pin to mine and ambushing me while I'm trying to get all this gunk off myself, is there any other reason why you're here right now? Aside from recruiting my orcs to make me feel bad about my organs."

"Yes, I think we should talk about everything that happened today. But first..."

And before Adam could finish, a loud banging sound made Shiv flinch. From outside, there came a loud roar. "Marcus, get out here! Get out here and take this beating like a man! You're not getting away from us! Not in this life or the next!"

Slowly, Shiv's head fell with near-despair as Adam began gagging with laughter again. "Broken Moon, they actually managed to track you all the way back here."

"I can't believe this," Shiv said. "I'm going to kill Marcus."

"He's already dead, Shiv."

"I'm going to find wherever he is. And if he isn't, I'm going to resurrect him and kill him again."

"MARCUS!" Shiv's pursuers bellowed.

"To hells with this," Shiv said, shutting off the shower and reaching for his towel. "I'm putting a stop to this shit. Enough is enough."

Chapter 218 (I) Gaslight

There are two words you must never say to someone who is deep in the throes of rage. Those two words are "calm down."

Saying "Calm down" to an angry person is like saying that their mother deserved to die in that demonic raid. Saying "Calm down" is telling them that their suffering was their fault, that they should have been stronger.

Listen very closely: In this class, we need to use anti-logic. What is anti-logic? It is the logic that goes against logic. This might be a bit harder for the automata students here, but I need you to think. Think very carefully.

In a vacuum, some things make sense. Yes, it would be most optimal if we simply didn't feel and instead operated to the utmost benefit of ourselves and our communities, but that's almost never the case. So, you understand that you have to be careful about what you say to certain people. You have to understand their personalities. If someone is easily enraged or already sad or mentally fragile, telling them that something is their fault or putting more pressure on them will only result in more damage and no gains.

Even if it will bother you, even if it might make you mad, it is up to you. And I mean you specifically. You took this class for a reason. You have imprinted this responsibility on yourself because now you know, now you understand the value and the weaponization of empathy. You must be the one that masters and uses your own emotions, because most other people can't.

They're not trained to. Vanguard's are not trained to use their emotions. They're trained to hit things, to break things, to be vicious, furious, to draw on their rage in times of desperation. But there are many different kinds of desperation, and sometimes the desperation starts at the heart. Sometimes someone is just hurt, and they don't know how to ask for help.

So in this course, you're going to listen very carefully. Because "I'm in pain and I need help" never comes out as "I'm in pain, and I need help." Most people are not honest, least of all to themselves.

So do not say "calm down." Instead, the magic words are "that sounds terrible, tell me more," or some variation thereof.

-Master-Professor Vrong McGill, DIPLO-312

218 (I)

Gaslight

"Wait, Shiv, what are you planning to do?" Adam asked, sticking his head out of the portal behind the Deathless.

As Shiv finished fastening the towel around his hip, he grabbed his Mask of Stolen Paths from his cape and placed it on his face. Immediately, his Perfect Semblance activated, and he assumed Marcus's guise once more.

"It's simple, Adam. I'm going to stop time, strangle all of them unconscious, and then dump them somewhere else."

The Gate Lord sputtered, "Is that your solution to everything? Stopping time and strangling someone unconscious."

"It's the easiest option," Shiv replied.

"And what about the girl?"

"What? Oh, the one that was following them? The pregnant one?"

"Yes, the pregnant one," Adam hissed. "You think strangling her is wise? Are you trying to get a Miscarriage Feat or Skill?"

Shiv blinked. "You think there's something like that?"

"I—you—" Adam's face changed color.

"I'm just asking!"

"Don't ask something like that! You're not bloody strangling the girl."

"Alright. Shit. Fine. You're right! But—"

The banging outside intensified. "Marcus, we know you're in there! We can feel you. Don't bother hiding. Your scent has been claimed by Master Magnolia, and she will never lose your trace again!"

Shiv sighed. "Okay, I guess that explains how they found me. She has some kind of Tracking skill."

"Tracking mixed in with Awareness, perhaps," Adam theorized. "Having one's scent... That's quite wolf-like, I would say." Just then, Adam sniffed himself, and then he licked his lips. "Ah, of course. She's a Shifter."

Shiv paused. "A Shifter?"

"She's a member of the Republic's Shifter Clans. They live in the sparsely populated regions of the Yellowstone Republic, usually deep in the wilderness or on the borders. Most of them are imbued with Blessings from a patron spirit, and that allows them to have certain skills that are usually only developable by an animal, or a specific kind of monster. When they get stronger, they are also rumored to have a hybrid state, but that could be just an advanced Biomancy spell known only to their tribe."

"It's also pointless," Helix commented with a roll of his eyes. He pulled his glasses off and began cleaning them using his white coat. "Taking Divine energy into yourself so that you can shape your body halfway into an animal? It's cheap. It's shoddy work. It's best that you understand the animal and surpass it. Wanting to be like a dog or a wolf..." He nearly spat in disgust. "I can make my nose so refined that I can taste the sweet smell of a bug's droppings from 1000 kilometers away."

"Why would you wanna be smelling bug droppings from a thousand kilometers away?" Shiv said mockingly.

Helix scowled. "It was an example."

"Shitty one," Shiv grunted with amusement.

Helix rolled his eyes so hard, some of his blood vessels popped. "Perhaps under my tutorship, I can instill you with highbrow humor."

"I beg the Challenger that doesn't happen," Whisper murmured. "Hopefully, he just kills you instead. You're about as funny as Male Pregnancy after the third time he repeats his gimmick in one day, Helix."

As Marcus's murder party continued trying to batter down his doors, Shiv could hear other people gathering outside, other doors clicking open.

One student hammered against the wall next to her room to get the group's attention. "Hey, have you considered that people are trying to study here? I don't care if this Marcus guy knocked up your sister, your mother, your dog, or you. I got a report due next week, so can you please take this family drama back to whatever rat nest you fucks crawled out of?"

"You dare call the glorious mountain holds of Old Brunswick a rat nest?!" a new voice bellowed. Shiv guessed it was probably one of the other boys in the group. Maybe that guy with a goat tattoo over his eye.

"We're not leaving," one of the boys called again. "We're not leaving until Marcus comes out and faces a trial on blood at our hands. For what he did. For everything he did."

A new voice joined the fray, this one deep and rumbling, with an odd accent. Shiv remembered hearing this one. It was the ogre in the communal kitchen earlier. "Hey you lot, if you keep makin' a ruckus like this, I'm gonna have to call campus security."

"Get away from us, you monster!"

"Monster," the deep voice echoed, rolling the "r" in an exaggerated manner. The ogre sighed. "Okay. Very, very mature. I'm gonna go back to the kitchen, and then I'm gonna signal security. You guys have fun battering down the doors and then cleaning out all the latrines next week. We'll be sure to leave you an extra special gift after holdin' it in for two days."

Shiv felt the ground shake as the ogre stomped away. He began pinching the bridge of his nose. "Alright, Adam, if I can't choke them out, what do you suggest? Because we're going to need to deal with campus security soon too. Just great. Can't even finish washing myself in peace. Fucking, come on."

"I don't know, how about opening the door and pretending to be Marcus? And then you can just, just speak to them. Calm them down with your Psychology."

"Yeah, I don't think they want to be calm, Adam. I think they want to kill Marcus. And if they try, their weapons or their fists are going to break against me. And then I'm going to have to answer several questions. Such as, why is this Adept-Tier student seemingly indestructible? And with Magnolia being there with them, she's definitely going to notice something's up. She's a Master. And if she gets pissed enough, she'll take a swing at me using one of her axes. And boy did she come close earlier."

"Well, you didn't help things much then either." Adam winced as he remembered that too. He'd been monitoring Shiv all this while, so the Deathless didn't need to recount his encounter with Magnolia.

"Maybe it's best that you don't speak with them. Alright. So how about you just come over this dimensional pathway and wait for things to blow over."

"Yeah, I considered that," Shiv said. "But they're probably going to keep waiting outside. And they're never going to stop hounding me. No, we need to find a way to finish this and finish this for good. I can't

be running away from them every time I try crossing the campus grounds. I'm not doing that shit. The entire point of a Perfect Semblance is being able to operate freely in the capital. This isn't free."

And then a cunning plan formed in the back of Shiv's mind. "Helix!" he called out. "Can you add some meat and, uh, other tissues to my face and ears right now?"

"You want me to apply bits of flesh to your Perfect Semblance and disguise you as someone who looks slightly different from Marcus. Is that it?" Helix sighed, and he pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Uh, yeah," Shiv said. "Something like that. Maybe I'll be able to pull something off. They'll come in, they'll think I'm Marcus, and then I'll tell them they found the wrong guy. And after that, they'll not come back around here anymore."

"She has your scent, though," Adam stressed.

"Scents can be wrong." Shiv waved him off. "I just need them to be convinced that—"

"Shiv, the Analyze skill!" Adam all but snarled. "Think, Shiv!"

"Godsdamn it!" Shiv forgot that the Analyze Skill was a thing. He barely used it, and most other people couldn't get much use out of it against him thanks to his Non-Sequitur Skill.

"You could just wait for security to arrive," Whisper noted. He used one of his knives to pick at his nails, seeming utterly nonchalant about the whole affair. "They will have to be removed for causing this disturbance, and then it won't be your matter. Or, I can help you make them vanish—"

"No!" Shiv and Adam both cried at the same time.

The Deathless sighed. "I just—" And then he paused as he looked at Adam. His cunning plan took a sharp turn. "Adam, we can disguise you. I can hide in your cape and telepathically tell you what to say!"

"What? No, absolutely not," Adam said. "This dorm has been assigned to you, and if I expose myself, people here might recognize me."

"That's why we disguise you," Shiv said, emphasizing the words. "Helix, get on that. Here, Adam." Shiv removed his cape and placed it on the Gate Lord's shoulders. "You just need to convince them to piss off, and you tell them that this room is your room, and that they made a mistake."

Before Adam could reject the idea, Shiv was already moving. He fastened his cape around the Gate Lord's neck, and Adam hissed as a wave of Biomancy crashed against his face. His nose grew a little bit longer, and his ears a little wider. Patches of meat were added to his cheeks, making him seem positively cherubic rather than lean and handsome.

"You owe me for this," Adam seethed at Shiv.

"I owe you for a lot of things, Adam," Shiv patted him on the shoulder. "You're a great guy. I'm going inside. I'll cook something for you later. Chicken wings or something. Here." Shiv wrapped his towel around Adam's body and somersaulted into the cape, earning a mock applause from the orcs.

"I can't believe I'm doing this," Adam grumbled under his breath. He looked down and realized he was still clad in his Legendary armor. Shiv's towel barely masked anything. "Ascendants, this..." He shaped a sheen of water over himself using his Heroic Skill and growled. "It'll have to do for now." He looked behind him. "Orcs. Stay there. Don't kill anything."

"Do we answer to you, now?" Helix asked.

Adam grunted and responded by whipping the Biomancer in the face with a tendril of water. Helix gave a squawking cry of pain as he tumbled back. Adam clicked his tongue. "Very mouthy for a non-martial in slapping distance."

Whisper and Tequila laughed.

"The bird's finding his cock," Mortar called from the other side.

Adam stomped out of the cramped bathroom while Shiv dove toward the forest of alloy, where his Voidmantid armor was still waiting.

Adam couldn't believe he was doing this shit. But compared to letting Shiv just choke these people out, or come up with another harebrained scheme, let alone whatever atrocities the orcs might inflict, this was likely for the best. Taking a deep breath, he centered himself and commanded his heart to calm.

"Relax, Adam," Shiv said over a freshly established Psychomantic link. "Just tell them you're another student or something. Make them think they're in the wrong place—oh, shit, get the bed. Make it seem like you live here."

Adam immediately stepped over to the bed. He made it seem messier than it had been a few moments ago, flipping the sheets and leaving the pillow askew. He also pulled the chair out—and grimaced as he realized Shiv didn't have any belongings. No books, no keepsakes, no anything.

Adam placed his rapier on the table for now, using it as a distraction. If someone came in, he could say he was trying to tinker with his family heirloom, keep it away from their prying eyes if they tried to Analyze it or touch it.

As another set of bangs followed, Adam bit his bottom lip and pulled the door open. "Yes, yes, WHAT IS IT ?" he shouted, speaking into the robe-covered chest of an absolutely massive student.

The Gate Lord did a double-take. This one was practically Shiv-sized. "How do they feed these people in Old Brunswick?" Adam thought to himself. "They're in the damned harshlands."

"I kind of want to know too," Shiv whispered.

As the angry band of students gathered to murder Marcus Unblood took in the sight of the disguised Adam Arrow, he looked back at them with a gesture of pure frustration. "So? Who are you fine, overfed gentlebrutes? Who is this Marcus? And what brings you to my dorm in the middle of the night?" He waved behind himself wildly, gesturing at the rest of his room. "If you can't see, I'm in the middle of

something here, tinkering with equipment. Very intensive work. Also distracting all the other people in the dorm."

The towering boy was briefly at a loss for words, but then he clenched his jaw and tried pushing Adam aside. Large as he was, though, there was one critical difference between them. Adam was a Heroic-Tier martial Pathbearer, and he most definitely wasn't going to be brushed aside by the lowest of Adepts.

The large boy shoved. Adam didn't move an inch. An irritated frown grew on the Gate Lord's face, and he simply folded his arms in mimicry of how Shiv would when he was unimpressed with someone.

"Move aside!" the large boy growled.

"I think not," Adam deadpanned.

Chapter 218 (II) Gaslight

He looked over the giant boy's shoulder and took in the rest of the group. The other two were clearly related to the first one, probably brothers. One had a stag or a goat or something, and the other one had an eagle tattooed over his eyes. Shifter Clan members too? Adam wondered. I can't tell for sure. I'm not getting any of those animal smells from them, not like with Magnolia.

Speaking of Magnolia, the older woman loomed in the background, her face masked beneath dark shadows of fury. She was like a storm lurking just over the bend of the horizon. And even more than the boys, she was on the verge of doing something violent and stupid.

Of everyone present, Adam understood why she was here the most. Marcus had impregnated her daughter—her daughter who'd died. She also seemed to despise the crippled boy for other reasons. As far as these kinds of disputes went, at least the former seemed like a relatively reasonable justification

to hate someone. Adam couldn't fully judge, especially considering his past with Shiv. But he'd never tried to kill him, not even when he was the Omenborn.

Magnolia was a different story altogether. She was inches away from a mental breakdown or an attempted murder.

"She's fragile," Shiv said.

"What?" Adam replied.

"She's not just angry, she's terrified too. I can feel her fear. It's heavy. Be careful around her. She's in worse mental shape than I thought."

The final member of the group stood a few meters away. She held her midriff, and there was a slight bulge there. Adam had a hard time looking at her. The Gate Lord had heard that underage pregnancies were quite common among Low-Tier Pathbearers and the poverty-stricken. But with the life Adam lived, he didn't much associate with those Low-Tier or poverty-stricken.

There were underage pregnancies in the nobility, of course. But those were usually handled by means of quiet delivery, followed by a hush adoption or a deposit to an orphanage. In other cases, an application of Biomancy could see the pregnancy resolved quickly as well. The nobility didn't wish for their bloodlines to be sullied, after all. Especially since a great many of them still believed in such things as genetic dynasties.

But for such unfortunate matters to occur among the nobility meant that either one or both parties were being unwise. Contraceptive enchantments were quite common in the Republic by this point,

especially for those of sufficient wealth and privilege. Pair that with the fact that Pathbearers who had too much of a Physicality Tier difference usually had issues copulating successfully, and then bringing a child to term thereafter, you were faced with what most demographers within the Republic called the Descending Slope of High-Tier Fertility.

As the bear-eyed boy let out a final rasp of effort, he reached up, jamming his hand and his fingers against Adam's eye. The Gate Lord turned his face away, and the first flickers of genuine anger crawled up inside of him. But his anger was a calculated thing. It wasn't explosive, and he didn't retaliate as a first resort. These were simple boys, and they were wounded inside.

He was a Gate Lord and a noble of Blackedge, and he had a responsibility as Pathbearer to administer justice and rightful judgment for those weaker than him and those who couldn't protect themselves.

He reached up and used his Hydromancy to pull the boy's hand away. Adam wrapped the bear-eyed student's hand in a dense weave of water magic. "Stop."

The bear-eyed boy growled and tried to strike Adam with his other hand. His fist moved at the speed of a slug crippled by salt after it was stomped on. The Gate Lord tilted his head and sighed. The punch missed. He pinned the bear-eyed boy's other hand as well.

"Bastard!" the eagle-eyed boy cried out. He and the goat-eye joined in, barreling into their brother, trying to add their strength to his and push Adam aside. Adam still didn't move. After all he'd faced over the past months, after the nightmare that was the Umbral Wilderness, the rogue Dragon-Knights, the Recollector, the Tarrasque, and the prison, this was practically a vacation.

A shitty one.

Adam sighed. "That's enough." He slowly turned the first boy's hand, who let out a rasping gasp. He watched as the boy turned his hand into something made of stone, but then the stone crumbled away as he failed to concentrate long enough on his Geomantic spell. Terrible focus, Adam chided internally. Undisciplined, lacking in practice.

Adam started to bend the first boy's left pinky. His eyes were on Magnolia now. "I'm not going to break his finger, but please get him away from me, him and everyone else."

The Master-Tier Shifter lifted her head and observed him quietly. "Who are you?" she asked. "You are no first-year."

"Oh, but I am," Adam replied, scowling internally. He hadn't wanted to play this card, but he really couldn't come up with anything better. "I'm a first-year under special request."

She blinked, then pressed her lips together as she understood what he was saying.

"Under special request" was Republic nobility code for declaring oneself to be of the Inquisition. And now Magnolia was starting to look worried, for in their hunt to avenge themselves on Marcus, they wandered into the den of a beast that was far larger than they.

"Holy shit," Shiv breathed. "Yeah... yeah, I think we can work with this. Why didn't you mention this before?"

"Because people talk, and even hinting that I'm an Inquisition plant might actually draw actual Inquisitorial attention to us," Adam replied, sighing.

"Kareth, Murad, Kenneth, back," Magnolia declared with a grimace. "He's not here."

"But you said—"

"Back!" she barked, and all three boys flinched away from Adam.

Standing in the hall nearby, Adam noticed the large green arm of an ogre. He poked his head beyond the rim of the door, and he saw the green-skinned student looking on, scooping spoonfuls of what smelled like chili from a massive bowl. Adam slowly pulled his head back in.

"That's fine," Shiv said. "He heard you. He's probably going to keep his mouth shut. No one wants the Inquisition on their ass."

"Or he's going to tell everyone," Adam replied.

As all three boys huffed and puffed, Adam regarded them with indifference. Instead, his main focus remained locked to Magnolia and hers to him. "I apologize for interrupting your evening," he said.

"However—" She hesitated, and she didn't leave.

"However?" Adam helped her so that she could continue on with this farce, and they could get this thing concluded. "Keep going. You have something to say, citizen."

"However, we were hunting someone, someone who's done our family a grave wrong. I followed his scent here using—"

"I know what you are, Shifter," Adam cut her off before she could go into a long explanation. "And I know who you're looking for. He's not here right now; he is temporarily in questioning."

Magnolia's mouth fell open. "I do not understand."

"You don't need to," Adam said with all the severity of an inquisitor. "We understand that you have already had an encounter with our suspect, and we don't care for you to have another."

Magnolia's surprise only grew, as did her trepidation.

"Yeah, keep pressing on that," Shiv whispered in the back of Adam's mind. "She's getting pretty scared now. You go down this angle, and maybe you'll be able to make them apprehensive about approaching Marcus for good."

"What you need to know is that we have a few things to ask Adept Unblood. It does not concern your expedition specifically, but it does have something to do with his quote-unquote miraculous resurrection."

"I didn't smell the taint of Necromancy on him," Magnolia said, trying to seem helpful to Adam.

"Oh, you didn't smell that," Adam replied with a sneer. "How wonderful, how glorious. I suppose that the Inquisition is no longer necessary. Every Risen can be detected by your nose, after all. So what's the point of this?"

"That's not what I meant," Magnolia quickly said, trying to defend herself. "You understand—"

"I understand nothing," Adam said, taking a step forward. Everyone before him stumbled back. "Nothing at all."

"In fact..." The Gate Lord looked each of them over. He hesitated. "In fact what, Shiv? In fact what?"

"Bring them in for questioning."

"What? Where? Inside the room?"

"Yeah. I want to know why they want Marcus dead so bad. It can't just be because he knocked a few people up, right? They're causing a scene right on Academy grounds for this. It's a lot of noise for something that should be handled quietly."

"I don't know, Shiv. These are Shifter clans and Wilderfolk. They treat family honor like nothing else."

"Yeah, alright, alright. Just let's figure this out so that we can try to make it right. Or at least put it to an end."

"Come inside," Inquisitor Adam said. He gestured for them to follow. And this time they didn't. They all lingered outside. The boys seemed petrified. Their faces were pale. Magnolia was frozen to the spot.

Adam looked over his shoulder and scowled.

"You tell them that it's not a request, it's a statement," Shiv suggested.

"Oh," Adam said internally, "that sounds damned vicious. I think I'll use that myself sometimes."

"Yeah, feel free to."

"That's not a request," Adam said with as much venom as he could muster. "That was a statement."

At that, a slight breath of terror escaped Magnolia as she filtered in along with the rest of the group. Quiet sobs came from their rear as the girl tried to keep herself composed. She felt bad. Adam felt bad. They felt bad together. It seemed no matter what they did, someone was going to suffer for it a slight bit today.

"Inquisitor," Magnolia began, waiting for Adam to give her a name. He realized he was quite young looking due to Helix's Biomantic modifications, and so trying to sell the image of a full inquisitor was likely folly.

"Interrogator," Adam corrected. "And that is all you are getting. We are not here to be friends. We are here to discuss why you are so intent on pursuing my suspect. My suspect, who is currently undergoing interrogations at the hands of my colleagues."

"Good," the bear-tattooed boy hissed. "I hope you make him suffer."

Adam eyed him briefly until the boy wilted before his glare and stopped talking. The Gate Lord sat down on his chair and regarded the assembled group with a disdain that only a High-Tier noble could muster. "Well, who wishes to begin their account of grievances? You've already stumbled into my operation, so you're going to be included in the report."

Magnolia trembled.

"If you have nothing to hide and your grievances are valid, then you will have nothing to worry about. We are here to protect you, citizen, from all dangers, including yourselves."

Magnolia's jaw was clenched tight, but the bear-tattooed boy was on the verge of exploding. "It was his fault!" he blurted out. His fists were clenched, and roiling waves of stone crawled across his body. His Geomancy was uncontrolled. He wasn't a well-trained mage, but he was powerful for his age.

Powerful for his age, Adam thought to himself. Who knows if he's actually even younger than me? And what is he compared to me? System... It's like we're not even the same species anymore.

As Adam stared into the rageful eyes of the Brunswick boy, he saw some hardship there, but there was also a softness as well. That was the kind of softness that came with youthful arrogance, with the assumption that they knew enough of the world, and that through will and the strength of their arm, they could chop down any foe.

That softness had died in Adam. Sometime after his engagement with the Dragon-Knights, sometime after the Recollector and that eldritch madness. Both times, he came so close to death that he could practically feel the void pulling at him. When he returned, a part of him was missing, and a part of him had been kissed by the emptiness that waited beyond. Adam would never know that feeling of invincibility again, that assumption he was special, untouchable. That war was a ballad, and he was the hero in the lyrics.

"You think you've been wounded," Adam said, speaking from the heart.

The bear-tattooed boy was surprised. "I—"

"You don't know what lurks beyond, do you? You think the frost giants are the worst of it. You think because you lost a few people that you know pain. Do you know what it's like to watch millions burn? To know that the people you trusted were liars and that everyone you counted on was a fraud, and that someone you assumed to be a monster became your closest ally and friend in dark times?"

The Brunswick boy said nothing. Neither did Shiv.

Adam shook his head. "It's beyond you. You don't understand. But you can help me understand. Why was it all his fault?" The Gate Lord gestured at the girl behind the group. "Is she his fault?"

"No, she's my sister, Caradah. She was deceived. She was seduced and impregnated by a vermin! A lout!"

"Is that it?" Adam said, sounding utterly bored with the whole matter.

"It's not just that. It's not just what he did to her and Opal. They... It was wrong. It was beyond wrong."

And suddenly, Adam stilled. He leaned in. "Was any of it unwilling?" he asked, voice low.

"I—" the bear-tattooed boy began.

"No!" the girl cried out. "It was—it was not—I just thought—I thought he cared." She touched her abdomen harder, and her eyes grew misty. Brown eyes. Too soft. Too young. Too hurt.

Adam looked away. And he thought of Isabella. His own insides grew twisted with grief at the thought of her. He didn't even know if she was still—he didn't know where she was and what he would say to her once they met again, if they met again. After what her father had done, after the Ascendants had left Blackedge. What was there to say? Too much.

"So, he's simply avoiding responsibility, is that it?" Adam continued.

"It's not just avoiding responsibility! He's the reason we got attacked by the Jotun!" The bear-tattooed boy looked aside and barely bit back a cry of rage. "We think he planned it."

"Planned it?" Adam leaned in again. Now he was genuinely interested. "You think that Marcus Unblood planned your ambush at the hands of the Jotun?"

"I know he did," the boy seethed. "How else would they have known we were on that path? How else could Master Magnolia be caught in one of their traps? Master Magnolia, she's... Her... She can sense anything. Her senses are so sharp."

Now Adam was looking at Magnolia, but she wasn't looking at him. No. Her gaze fell downward. Despondent. Miserable.

"I think I know what this is," Shiv said, sounding a bit dour himself. "I think she genuinely screwed up, got some of these kids killed. But then she probably found out that her daughter was pregnant after she died, and she found out Marcus was probably the father afterward too. Now Marcus is suddenly back and alive. The other girl was also attached to him by pregnancy. The boys probably hate him already because of that. He was already Cursed, so probably ostracized from the village, and the easier story to stomach is the story that the freak among you who already impregnated two girls, cheated on both of them, was also the reason so many of the expedition died."

Adam was inclined to agree, though he wasn't entirely certain yet. There were still many pieces missing, but the Deathless had an intuition about people sometimes, and a cruel insight.

"Won't call it cruel, it's just everyone I use my Psychology on is practically an enemy."

"Your Psychology was born from orcs," Adam replied.

That made Shiv noticeably wince. "Yeah, it was."

"It might not be a bad thing right now. I have a feeling that this situation is just as bleak and ugly as it seems. Gods. What a mess. Shoved right into our faces. Fucking System."

"Fucking system," Shiv agreed.

The Gate Lord didn't press. He let Magnolia have her dignity. "But you have no evidence."

"I—I—" The bear-eyed boy sputtered as he tried to master his anger.

"He was Cursed, Master-Interrogator," the other boy with the eagle tattoo over his eye said. "Cursed by the Ascendants themselves. Surely that is a sign of the foulness in his soul."

"I didn't ask you for a theology lesson. I asked you if you had evidence that he led the Jotun to attack you. That would be grounds for something else," Adam grunted. "If you do not, then how do you wish for me to conduct this?"

"You can put him to the question," the eagle boy continued. "Break him, and the truth will follow."

"And what do you think is happening right now? And how much do you think a boy with potential brain damage can break? You have to take that into account as well. He's been without oxygen for some time. Actually, what am I doing? All of you out. All of you except for her and her." Adam gestured toward Magnolia and Caradah, as Shiv instructed.

The boys looked uncertain and even willing to fight. There was a doubt in their body language. They knew they couldn't beat Adam, but even so, they didn't want to abandon their sister or their master.

"Leave," Magnolia said softly. "For now, just leave. Wait outside, please." It looked like she had aged a decade, and she was utterly worn. Caradah, meanwhile, was shivering as if the room had dropped a good 30 degrees.

The retreat of the three boys was as slow as it was awkward, and as they got to the hallway again, they all looked back. They waited outside attentively, like hounds told to sit and linger by their masters.

The door was shut by Magnolia, and she whispered something to them, just before she closed it entirely. When she turned, she faced Adam once more, and there she stood, reluctant to approach him, fearful of what might follow.

"I want you to look me in the eye," Adam said, pointing to his eye, "and tell me that it was his fault, and not yours. Tell me Marcus Unblood caused the Jotun attack, and not your carelessness and inability. Tell me Marcus Unblood is at fault for your daughter's demise, and not you."

Chapter 219 (I) Heartbreak

People lie to themselves for the sake of their broken hearts; hence, religion comes to be. We lie to ourselves, and we call it a story. We imagine ourselves to be champions and heroes. We reduce our enemies and challenges down to caricatures and featureless shadows.

And we do it all because we are such fragile, evanescent little things.

Because to embrace the truth is to maul your mind. It is to accept that you don't matter. That you are but an animal, even touched by the System and granted magic.

It is to accept that your story holds no weight beyond your belief and your strength to force its truth, and in the end, the songs you sing will be regarded as little more than incoherent noise, and your faith, less than the braying of a dying animal.

Nothing is true. Nothing is sacred. Not unless you manage to impose your will above the System. But you can't. No one tries.

There is only me.

-Udraal Thann

219 (I)

Heartbreak

A war took shape behind Magnolia's eyes. Her facial muscles tensed, and her breath ceased to flow. Her right hand instinctively went for one of her axes, but she pulled away when she realized what she was doing. Magnolia was a martial Pathbearer to the bone. Violence was the first and easiest solution she could think of. But violence wouldn't save her from the Inquisition, nor was it a tool that could prevail against a superior killer.

Despite how it discomfited her, she knew the harsh facts lay before her. If she raised her blade, she would find herself dead at Adam's hand. But all too often, minds developed wounds when rational understanding came to clash against one's desired truth. It might be easier for her to die swinging her axe at Adam. It might give her some measure of peace—a final, acceptable end.

Seconds passed. Caradah looked upon Magnolia with increasing worry, and Adam prepared himself for any kind of reaction, be it emotional or volatile.

And then, the Master-Tier Shifter's face hardened into a mask of anger. "No," she hissed with the hint of a rageful growl. "No, it was the fault of that bastard bloodless boy. It was the fault of Marcus Unblood that we suffered. It was not my doing."

"She's bullshitting us," Shiv said. "Ask her to tell you what happened in detail."

"How do you know?" Adam replied rapidly.

"That's not the look of someone coming to terms. That's the look of someone giving in to their anger."

"Anger? You sure?"

"I also make that face sometimes."

Adam let out a breath of dismay. "Very well. Tell me everything that happened during the expedition."

Caradah looked faint, like she was on the edge of tears.

Magnolia swallowed. "I have already reported this to your Inquisition, Master Interrogator."

"Yes, but they are not me," Adam replied. He lowered his voice toward the end. "And I have many things I still wish to know. My colleagues were in charge of recounting what happened during the expedition, and now, it seems the events there involve Marcus Unblood substantially. Even if not directly useful, it will give me insight into my subject of interrogation. So, if you would please give your accounting of events.

For a few beats, Magnolia stared ahead. Her eyes were blank, and it was as if Adam wasn't there at all. And then, all of a sudden, she began to speak. She told him about the day of the expedition. How far it was from Old Brunswick to the capital. How perilous the mountains were in the coming summer season.

Living on the fringes of the Republic exposed one to a great many dangers. The swell of monsters would wake with the coming summer. And the change of the ecology also brought with it disasters. Avalanches, monstrosities, new diseases being released into the air. Then there were the primal gates that sometimes formed, and the dimensionals that spawned from them, seeking violence.

But most of all, there were the Jotun and pale lurkers, Frost Giants seeking to prove themselves to the court of the Shattered Moon, raiding the Republic's territory and slaying its people. When they brought corpses back, they earned prestige and mithril, depending on how many they slew, and how high their victims' Tiers were.

This was also the reason the expedition was necessary. It seemed the Yellowstone Republic had a great many advantages over their bestial northern neighbors in terms of resources and population, as well as its number of High-Tier Pathbearers. However, the Republic was also stretched wide, and the Jotun were exceptional at intercepting jumps. Teleportation could only begin once they reached the threshold of Stag's Death, south of Old Brunswick.

It was a fortress outpost meant to monitor the northern border, and a place so well guarded that any jump interception would be intercepted itself and swiftly turned into a bloody slaughter. Yet there was quite a distance between the Shifters' mountain holds and Stag's Death: a whole mountain range needed to be crossed before they reached the outskirts of the Republic's core.

At this point, Shiv had his own inquiry. "Why do people even live out there?" he asked. "Just make them move closer to Stag's Death. The way I see it, it's not that hard to travel around when you're a Master. Location shouldn't be that much of an issue."

"Because it's been their home for generations," Adam replied.

"People change when you hold a torch," Shiv said, still lost.

The young lord understood why his friend thought that way. Shiv had never had anything. With how ostracized he felt at Blackedge, "home" was little less than a nebulous concept, filled with more noise than meaning. Comparatively, Adam's heart was still filled with sourness. Sourness for all who suffered during the destruction and death his town faced during the attack; the torment his father endured, and the brutality of the vicar.

Adam understood what it meant to fear losing a home—to refuse to lose a home. "They've lived there for centuries, Shiv. Longer, even. They tell their children stories about why the place belongs to them, how they've protected it from any threat. The stories make them part of the place as well. And ultimately, they refuse to leave because they were there before the Yellowstone Republic was even a thing, as well as the patron deities and spirit animals they adhere to. To flee is sacrilege."

The Gate Lord hesitated for a moment, and he tried to come up with a better analogy. "It's like this. If someone tried to force you out of the Swan-Eating Toad, how would you respond?"

And the Deathless finally understood. "Oh. Yeah, no. Someone's gonna die, and it isn't me."

Adam huffed. "There we go."

Magnolia carried on now. She spoke of how their expedition was formed early in the morning, before even sunrise. It was important to move at night because should one cast a silhouette, even in the far horizon, someone might get a shot at them. It was not uncommon for people to go missing at high altitudes and be found days later with a frost giant's javelin buried inside their torso.

The expedition started two hundred strong. The students bound for Phoenix Academy were only a small portion of the main contingent. The rest were traders or travelers making their way from mountain holds to Stag's Death and seeking a security escort to slip free from the harshness of the Republic's periphery and return to its core. Magnolia and twelve other Shifters were tasked as shepherds for the expedition.

Things would have gone fine if the weather had stayed placid like the Aeromancers had claimed. If the scouts had been right about the conditions of the land and the potential positions of monsters and Jotun, it would have turned out fine. If so many things had unfolded in accordance with Magnolia's expectations.

For the most part, they did.

However, there was one variable that seemed to compromise everything. One thing that she couldn't send away: the infamous Marcus Unblood.

"I had to move right across from the mongrel as well. I don't know why, but the Academy's representative favored him, selected him as a Wild Card."

"You don't know why?" Adam scoffed. "The Wild Card Program is not granted on a whim. Take this seriously."

Magnolia snarled, but decided to elaborate. "Yes, the Curse-blooded boy was caught in an avalanche. Yes, there was a girl along with him, and perhaps his meager skills kept her alive. But it didn't matter, we would have saved them before either expired. Well, at least the girl, her Physicality was sufficient. It was unnecessary."

"Thank you," Adam cut her off, unwilling to waste any more time on her ranting. "So, he earned his place through a heroic action. He was selected for a feat of emergency surgery. I understand now."

Magnolia looked as if she had swallowed a toad, and she seemed desperate to recontextualize Marcus' merits in some fashion.

Adam sighed. "Right, I see. And so, Marcus Unblood was a participant in the expedition. What did he do to make things go wrong?" He gestured for her to go on.

Magnolia clenched her teeth and spent a moment centering herself before she continued. "Caradah is not the only girl of our hold to be sullied by the bastard's seed," she hissed. The Master-Tier Shifter's glare at the girl was a knowing one, and there was no warmth there. Not like how her brothers looked upon her.

Caradah flinched away from Magnolia as a crushing pressure radiated out from the latter. Magnolia was trying to keep the girl silent. Adam forced himself to remain calm. He was usually understanding, even if he had something of a temper. But the scene unfolding provoked him. The gall for one strong to be blaming the weak, for one old to condemn the young. Magnolia was distraught, but that didn't give her the right to forsake all decency. She was a Pathbearer—there were standards.

"Don't do that again," Adam said coolly.

Magnolia blinked. "Excuse me?"

"The Intimidation," the Gate Lord grunted. "I know what you're doing. My sympathy is not infinite. Your pain does not give you leave to lash out. You flail like a wounded child. We are Pathbearers. And our responsibility is greater because of it."

Caradah looked upon him with surprise. And Magnolia was really at a loss for words. "I..." She seemed unsure if she wished to sigh in outrage or apology.

"Save it," Adam said. "I'm not trying to chide you like a master would an apprentice. I'm just reminding you that you sit in an inquisitor's presence. I will not abide by rank displays of manipulation. Now go on."

Magnolia told him how the first day of the expedition had gone on without too many issues. They'd moved more slowly than expected due to encountering a Hive of Skindrinker Termites along the way. After the hive was put to the flames and its warriors were butchered, they pressed down the mountain and had to make camp for the day as the sun rose.

It was during this time that a certain event followed. It appeared that Magnolia's family, Opal and Caradah, didn't know about each other's relationship to Marcus before. When they confronted him, his reluctance to talk with either of them on the journey was uncovered in a most disquieting scene that came with a lot of shouting, crying, and histrionics.

Caradah's brothers attempted to pitch Marcus off the side of the mountain. Opal stopped them, and then Opal returned, was confronted by her mother, and they dueled entirely in public. By this point, Magnolia was taking breaks every few seconds, pausing every few sentences. Her eyes were darting about, and it seemed she was on the edge of something, but she held herself back, even though the lump in her throat got more and more obvious.

"Last time we talked, I said I should have brought her out on more hunts," Magnolia muttered with a near-smile. "I should have had my apprentices watch her, or moved her to another mountain hold. I should have killed the bastard when I caught them together the first time... and that was my fault. That was my true fault. But everything that followed..."

Magnolia bristled with anger, and her silence grew dark and bitter.

A feeling of awkward discomfort rose up inside Shiv, and it merged with the anxiety pressing down on Adam. The Gate Lord could handle a great many things. Challenges, projects, reports, combat—all fine! But personal drama made him cringe. Violently. He nearly succumbed to overwhelming second-hand embarrassment, and he warred against his urge to stick his fingers in his ears and loudly hum to himself, pretending he couldn't hear anything.

Adam had done that more than a few times during his days at the academy. But right now, there was no avoiding this. He was getting a full dose of drama, and he hated it.

"I said—I said some things to my daughter. Some things I cannot take back," Magnolia admitted, her voice barely louder than a whisper. "And I did something unbecoming. I shamed her in front of too many eyes. I pushed her, and once she couldn't take any more, she pushed back, admitted that she was carrying his child." Magnolia then looked down at her hands, and she clenched them into fists. "I struck my daughter, and she ran after that. She ran. I called her Bloodless in the presence of the whole expedition. I claimed she was a bastard now too. But it was just a cry of anger. I didn't mean that. I didn't mean that. I didn't mean that..."

She repeated these words several more times. And then she hid her face from Adam and Caradah. But when she looked up again, her gaze was maddened with pain. "I ignored her for hours. But Marcus went after her. He went after her first. I waited with the expedition. But then... but then I grew worried after hours. Then my anger died, and my shame grew. I told the expedition to hold in place and then I..."

And the rest of the story came flooding out of her. "I pursued her. That bloodless bastard Marcus did as well. Stupid fool was blind. He didn't know where he was going and found himself lost. But I did. Dawn's light was high, and soon it would have been morning. I knew my daughter's scent. I was not sure how she could keep me from finding her. But within minutes, I smelled something wrong. I smelt the taste of blood on the wind. And I knew it. I knew it. When there is enough blood, it drowns out all other tastes as well."

She wrapped her arms around herself. "She'd been caught in a Jotun trap. By the time I reached her, her leg had nearly been severed clean. It was a trap meant for dire bears. And I know how the Jotun fight. I know their foul ways. They smear their traps in feces. They pour diseases and poisons upon the metal, tainting wounds beyond mere injuries of flesh."

The Shifter paused, and she looked at Adam. There was a certain sense of clarity in her eyes. "Do you have a child, interrogator?"

Adam opened and closed his mouth several times, and then he shook his head.

Chapter 219 (II) Heartbreak

"You do not. I can see it on your face. You are powerful, and you are young. And this is not a slight, but a child is a weakness beyond strength, beyond power. When you have someone, someone made of your flesh, someone made from your love, someone you care for... you can't just let them go. The anger you feel towards them is greater than anything you can imagine. But so is the affection, and so is the pain. I pray you never hear your own child's screams, your own child howling for you. She screamed 'mama, mama,' even though I called her bloodless. Even though I struck her. It was like it didn't happen at all, because she howled for me. Me."

Magnolia swallowed, and she teetered on the brink.

"I managed to force the trap open. But then the Jotun were upon us. They were in the ice, hiding beneath the snow. They had been drawn by her cries. I was not the only Master there. There was a javelin-wielding Jotun, one that could travel through the stones themselves. He emerged, he flung his weapon at my girl. I barely managed to deflect it in time. But then it burst apart, and the air filled with smoke, and in the chaos... in the chaos..."

Magnolia stopped talking, and Adam leaned.

"In the chaos, I think... I think one of them used her as a shield, and I think I struck her with my axe." Now the Master-Tier Shifter spoke with a flat affect, as if she were separated from herself, lost in a trance. "I let the rage take me after. I let the wolf in, but when I returned to myself, the Jotun were dead, my daughter was gone, and over her body there was Marcus. There was only Marcus, and I... and I..." She looked at her hands again, and she began to shiver.

Shiv sighed. "Ask her if she killed Marcus in the aftermath."

"What?" Adam replied with startlement.

"She keeps looking at her hands, and she just told us that she went wolf and slaughtered all the Jotun. So. No one left to kill Marcus. He went after Opal too, and she probably found him cradling the body of her daughter after she came out of her trance. After that, well, not hard to guess, right?"

"Oh, gods."

The Gate Lord clenched his teeth and forced the question out. "Master Magnolia, did you slay Marcus Unblood in the aftermath?"

Caradah let out a cry of alarm, but Magnolia kept staring through the Gate Lord, and even before she admitted it, he knew.

"I saw him kneeling over my daughter, crying, crying as if she meant something to him. But she was my daughter... He caused this." Suddenly, Magnolia seethed. "I didn't use my hands, I didn't even think he was good enough for that. No, I forced him to drink a poison, one that shouldn't be curable, one that would simply make the body shut down; make his lungs stop working. It was more peace than he deserves. I just watched him fall, and after that, I laid him there. And... and..."

"Then you would claim that he was another casualty during the frost giant raid." Adam sighed.

"But then, the expedition... They were also attacked while I was gone," Magnolia said, clearly disturbed. Her words were getting increasingly incoherent. She shook her head, and a groan came out of her mouth. "When I descended the mountain to come and save my daughter, my own people were left exposed. And in my haste, I must have made too much noise, drawn too much attention. I found the survivors, my caravan, locked in desperate struggle by the time I got back, and so I threw myself into the fray as well. I fought, I saved who I could, but the other Shifters who came with me... They died. Bots. Men. Women. Friends I had known for years, left open and butchered because of the actions of one boy."

"And she's still blaming him," Shiv said telepathically. "It might be the only thing that's keeping her sane right now."

Adam leaned back in his chair and pinched the bridge of his nose. He didn't know what the System was trying to do by this point, if it was the System's doing at all.

Instead of an odd, quirky story about a boy who couldn't keep it in his pants, and two unfortunate girls who needed to make a decision regarding the children he'd sired, it was the tale of a collective chain of bad decisions leading to catastrophe. A Master-Tier Shifter in utter denial about her part in the whole matter, a slaughtered expedition, a very real murder committed upon Marcus Unblood, and now the renewal of the conflict with his "holy" resurrection.

No wonder Magnolia was so willing to swing her axe at him. She wasn't just trying to avenge the death of her daughter; she was trying to keep her guilt and the actual truth buried as well.

"Dearest Ascendants," Adam muttered. "This is such a godsdamned mess..."

"Fucking tell me about it," Shiv breathed.

Adam cleared his throat. "Master-Shifter." Magnolia didn't respond. "Master-Shifter!"

Caradah took a step forward. "Please, you cannot blame Master Magnolia! She suffered. She isn't—"

"I don't need you to defend me." Magnolia snapped, her eyes wide and blazing with fury. "I don't need to be defended. I am not wrong. I am not the one who did wrong. I am not wrong. I am not wrong." And with each time she repeated the word, she clutched her fists tighter and tighter. It was as if she was trying to hold back from breaking from the fear and pressure, as if she was doing everything she could to stop herself from going insane.

"What do we do now?" Adam asked Shiv.

Shiv hesitated, uncertain himself. "Now? We try to give her whatever closure we can and get her to stop hunting Marcus."

"But she bloody killed him, didn't she?" Adam hissed.

"Yeah, I know. But if we bring this out in the open, we're probably going to keep having problems with the old Brunswick boys too. The actual Inquisition will definitely be looking into it."

"So what should we do? Just cover up the murder?" Adam sounded incredulous.

"Maybe," the Deathless grunted, also sounding displeased. "It's not ideal, but—"

"Gods, Shiv. It's still a life." Adam groaned. "Marcus Unblood might be a shitty layabout who never used protection, but he didn't deserve to be murdered. He didn't deserve all this."

"So what should we do, Adam? You want me to kill her? You want me to beat her to death?"

"No!" Adam almost cried verbally. "I just want some measure of justice to be done."

"I don't know what that looks like," Shiv said, and that hit Adam in a brittle spot too. "Not for this. There's no breaking this woman anymore. Short of killing the girl next to her or something insane like that, I can't hurt her any worse than she already is, and we sure as hells can't report her ourselves. I don't know what to do."

"Me neither."

Silence followed. Silence between Shiv and Adam. Silence between Magnolia and Caradah.

Shiv grunted. "I think we should ask Irons. I'm sure he would have a suggestion."

"Might be a good idea," Adam replied.

"Am I to be judged, Interrogator? Am I to be judged for defending my daughter's honor? For striking down the one that led us to ruin?"

Adam hesitated for a long moment before he spoke. "It is not my place to say. However..." he trailed off uncomfortably.

"However," Shiv suggested helpfully, "she and the other Old Brunswick people are to stay far away from Marcus Unblood. For he is of interest to the Inquisition, and there is an internal trial pending with regard to him as well."

"Marcus Unblood is no longer your concern," Adam began once more. "He is the concern of the Republic's Inquisition, and we will see that he is properly punished or absolved once our investigation is completed. I say this again..." Adam leaned in. "I must insist you do not go near him. Not until I or someone else from the Inquisition grants you the proper exemption."

"I don't know if I can stand it," Magnolia said, her breath airy and raspy. "If he is allowed to live free in this world, to live without burdens after all he inflicted..."

"He is not free," Adam stressed again. "I said an internal investigation is pending. Furthermore," he lowered his voice, "we do not know for sure if he is truly Marcus Unblood. Necromancy has still not been ruled out."

Magnolia frowned, and Caradah flinched back. "Necromancy," the girl whimpered in fear. She painted a cross before herself and split it in half, making the sign of the Ascendants. A moment later, Magnolia repeated the same action with greater reluctance.

"Are you sure, Interrogator?" Magnolia asked. "I truly did not smell the taint of undeath on him."

"We are not sure, which is why we are investigating," Adam said flatly. "But I am going to be blunt, I have never encountered a boy who woke up in the morgue, despite the urban legends. Awfully convenient, don't you think? And did he seem different to you? Bolder? Crueler? Like kind of an arrogant bastard."

"Ouch," Shiv muttered.

Magnolia's mouth opened and closed several times, but she finally offered a nod of confirmation.

Caradah, however, clutched her chest. "Does this mean that his soul is still trapped between worlds?" she whispered, dread evident in her voice.

Adam sighed. "Uncertain. But it's best that you keep your distance. He could see you and your child infected if he is truly undead. The Inquisition will contact you and administer proper reparations."

"Reparations?" both Caradah and Magnolia said at the same time.

"Yes. As you are associated with the subject, and he owes you a remittance, we will see you compensated for... losses. As is Republic policy."

"Adam," Shiv said. "What are you doing?"

"Something foolish. We're going to need to scrounge up some mithril for this girl."

"What do we need to do that for?"

"Because she's a poor, unfortunate, underage wildergirl who's carrying the child of a Curse-born bastard. Her brothers seemed nice enough, but she's going to need some resources if she wishes to keep the child and raise it well."

"And where are we going to find that mithril, Adam?" Shiv asked, sounding slightly annoyed. "You're going to make me steal from one of the—" And then the Deathless paused. "Oh, that might work. Where's the nearest bank?"

"No, Shiv, we're not staging a bank robbery."

"You're damn right 'we're' not doing it," Shiv replied. "But you know, I don't always keep track of where Whisper or Gone and Kura might go."

"You're talking about committing crimes!" Adam hissed with near-outrage.

"Well, since we have Legendary criminals lying around, we might as well use them for crimes, no? And I'm talking about taking personal action against the Ascendants here, Adam. For everything they committed against us. It's righteous retribution."

"You'd be hurting local communities."

"I've seen the local communities. They're noble; they'll survive."

"Shiv!"

"Interrogator," Caradah said, "are you alright? Why are you making those expressions?"

Adam gritted his teeth as he caught himself. "It's just that your story has given me a headache. It's truly bleak." He looked down at the ground, and Caradah sniffled, trying not to cry again. "One of my agents will be in touch with you. In the meantime, stay away from Marcus Unblood. This is for your own safety. And last but not least..."

Adam held up a hand for Magnolia to stay quiet while he tried to decide what parting words he had for her, if he was really just going to let her go like this. "Your daughter, you said she screamed your name. When she was caught in the trap, she screamed your name, not Marcus's?"

Magnolia's face twisted in outrage. "Yes, of course mine."

Adam stood up and took a step toward her. "Good. You must remember that. You must remember that she was begging you, and only you, when she was caught. And she was only there because you needed to be a Master Pathbearer, and you weren't. You needed to be a mother, and you weren't. You needed to control yourself, and you didn't. There are consequences! Consequences! And we pay them!"

"Adam, don't—" Shiv was calling from the inside, but the Gate Lord ignored him. With every word he cast in Magnolia's direction, she shook as if struck. Her hand kept dropping toward her axe, but pulled away every time she remembered where she was and who she was facing. A single tear dropped from her left eye.

"You have a responsibility to her now," Adam said, pointing at Caradah. "You have a responsibility to the rest of your people, and it is a responsibility that supersedes your hatred for some unblooded boy."

"I was—" Magnolia began.

"There is no making it right!" Adam shouted. "I don't care how you feel or what you think the cause of all this was. It's too late to make things right. Your daughter is dead. Your people are dead. There's only what comes after. Now," he let out a breath, "get out. I will find you in time. We will inform you of how the Marcus Unblood situation is to conclude. But in the meantime, he is ours. You stay away. You touch him, and you touch Inquisitorial property. Do that, and I put you in a small cell. Too small for you to even kneel. You will stay there for a few years until you learn your lesson. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Master Interrogator," Magnolia ground out, clearly more terrified than offended now. She didn't want to nod, but she did. She refused to look at Adam at all in the aftermath, and Caradah all but fled from the room as soon as Adam released them. The Master-Tier Shifter walked on shaking legs, and when she opened the door, the three boys were waiting there with bated breath.

Standing among them were members of campus security. They wore that prismatic cuirass and the beret, which signaled their belonging to the academic militia. But they weren't alone. For with them was a very tired, very unimpressed Captain Harry Irons.

"Oh, good." Adam sighed. "Time for me to sour his day some more too."

"Captain Irons," Adam called. "Come in. Please. Just you. I am finished with my interviewees. I wish to inform you of the results so that you may see the Inquisition's will enforced."

Irons's left eye twitched. "I see." He stepped into the room, and Adam prepared himself to ruin another person's evening.

"Is it weird that I wish we were fighting another group of Legendary psychopaths instead of this?" Shiv muttered.

"No. Me too, Shiv. Me too."

Chapter 220 (I) Slipgate

Welcome to GEN-101. I see some of you rolling your eyes already, discounting the importance of this class. I know some of you are martial Pathbearers who think your path in life is set. You will be the hammer of the Republic. You will be its fist. You will be its bow, its dagger. You will be its mind.

For some of you, general education doesn't seem to hold a purpose. What point is there in making sure you can write an essay or conduct statistical analysis? For those of you who are crafters or magi, it might seem an inadequate thing as well. Not only is the course pointless, but it's also pointlessly easy. Indeed, the written and math portions of this class might be, but that is not the purpose of this class.

You will not be taking Gen Ed 101 for the rest of the semester. You will be taking it for the next two to three weeks, and then you will be assigned supplemental classes per your weaknesses. That is the point of Gen Ed 101.

For the martials here, you're going to receive an order someday, and you're going to need to respond to it. You best be able to write well and write legibly, and write and describe your thoughts in an understandable manner. Failure to do so might see your comrades slain, might see medical supplies delayed, might cause confusion and chaos within your ranks.

If you are bad at math or personal finances, you're going to learn how to do that because there's little point in spending all your mithril on a set of armor and finding yourself destitute, first forced to serve as some Low-Tier Sell-Skill to make up for your empty pockets.

And for the Magi, we're here to make sure you can clean your own bloody clothes using your own bloody hands and that you can talk to people without issue. We don't need you to like socialization; we need you to be capable of it, and that is non-negotiable. This is not about comfort, but functionality.

We rise individually, but we rise on scaffolds and shoulders. The scaffolds installed by those who came before and the shoulders of giants who trailblazed certain paths ahead of us, who removed impediments for our progress.

Now wipe those looks off your face, turn your eyes to the board, and start writing. The faster you get this done, the faster the class can move on to the next portion of the matter: introducing yourselves to each other. Dreadful, I know. I can already tell most of you are going to need to go to CHARM-101. Abernathy is going to be so very happy this semester.

-Master-Instructor Michael Hu, GEN-101, Phoenix Academy

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Slipgate

By the time Adam and Shiv finished explaining things to Irons, he looked like someone had pissed in his breakfast.

"I see." The captain sighed. "Do you think she's a danger to herself or anyone else right now?"

Adam shrugged. "I can't quite say. She's definitely not stable, though. She's still in denial that she did anything wrong."

"The mind is a fragile thing after it's shattered," Irons grunted.

"And people love scooping up bullshit and telling themselves it's chocolate." Shiv let out a breath of annoyance from where he lounged on the bed. "She should keep away from Marcus for now, though. Her and the rest of her old Brunswick bunch. Won't stop them from shooting ugly looks at me or spreading rumors, maybe, but that's them dealt with."

"Yes, but the resolution came at potentially increased peril." Irons narrowed his eyes at both Adam and Shiv. "Was it wise to invoke the presence of the Inquisition?"

"No," Adam said, "absolutely not, but it was the easiest thing I could think of. The last thing we needed was Shiv compromising his cover in some other way. Like Magnolia breaking her blade on his face."

Shiv crossed his arms in offense. "If she did that—"

"You would have stopped time and choked her unconscious, yes, Shiv, truly the best plan."

"And she would have deserved it too."

The captain still looked slightly displeased. "You could have called for me."

"They were already at the door," Shiv said, "and before things got really dark, it seemed like a goofy story. Marcus Unblood apparently got two girls pregnant, and now one girl's brothers are trying to kick

his ass. What are you supposed to do about that? Enforce discipline? Yeah, that would draw attention too. The simple matter is that the Neath liaison left out a bunch of stuff or didn't know a bunch of stuff himself. Now we're paying the price for that. Speaking of which: Cullywier!"

The fairy manifested in a burst of wind, flower petals, and fragrance. He stood behind Irons, whose eyes widened uncharacteristically at the sight of the newcomer towering over him.

"Is that a fairy?" Irons asked.

"Supposedly," Shiv replied. "So far, I don't see what the big deal is, aside from him drinking up all that Necromancy."

"That's not unique to me," Cullyweir replied nonchalantly. "All fairies can neutralize Necromancy. We don't decay. We don't die. Why would a lore of endings affect a creature of eternal cycles?"

"Yeah, that's cool and all, but did you not know that Marcus got murdered by his own people? Or did you just not plan on telling me?"

The fairy looked up at the ceiling, which was only a hand's length away from his face, and paused briefly. A second later, he replied, "I did not know. The Dragon Brokers thank you for this information."

Shiv threw up his hands in frustration. "Alright, so they're just incompetent, not malicious. Perfect."

"I must remind you that this body was provided on short notice." Cullywier offered a silly smile. It looked uncanny, like an animal trying to mimic a human expression. "All things done in haste will usually come with their own downsides."

"That is undeniable," Irons said flatly, agreeing with Cullywier.

"Alright, fine, you didn't know that, but is there any other information I need to know about Marcus? Does he have some other girl he impregnated back in the mountain holds? Some kind of evil twin somewhere? A Legend with a grudge? Anything like that?"

Once more, Cullywier paused, and Shiv realized the fairy was actively communing with the Dragon Brokers each time. "That is not known to us thus far, but we will see if any other unsavory details about the past of Marcus Unblood turn up."

"That's about as much as I can ask for right now," Shiv grunted with disgruntled acceptance.

"May I be dismissed then, Deathless?" Cullywier asked.

Help support creative writers by finding and reading their stories on the original site.

"Yeah." Shiv waved away the fairest. "You can—" Cullywier vanished in a burst of fading wind, "—go now."

Shiv sighed and rubbed his face. "Didn't even get finished scrubbing my own ass before we had to deal with that shit. Alright, Irons, can you smooth this over with the kids here and the campus militia?"

The captain nodded.

"Great, cause Adam and I are gonna go back to the coliseum. I'm not sticking around here, even if we got Magnolia to piss off. I don't trust the looks the old Brunswick boys were giving Adam earlier."

Irons gave a grunt of acknowledgement. "I will see things handled properly. And that they don't get out of hand."

Shiv looked at Irons once more and considered something. "Hey, you said that Melissa gave you some evidence earlier, right?"

Irons nodded slowly. "She did."

"Any chance you could send some of that over? Or have Adam pick some of that up? I think we're gonna be doing some planning and research tonight, along with some other stuff. We might be able to get through some of that too. See if we find anything."

The captain mulled that over for a moment, and he nodded once more. "It would be appreciated."

Just then, Adam pulled out the pin from earlier. And that made Irons cock his head.

"This is a special pin given to me by Enchanter Merriemmel," Adam said. "It belongs to a member of on-campus security, currently enjoying a period of extended leave."

A look of distaste passed over the captain's face, but if he had any objections, he kept them to himself. "I see."

Another stream of mana formed between Irons' pin and Adam's security pin, and soon, there was a growing communications network between the trio.

"I'll send you a message in a bit," Adam said. "I'll tell you that 'the evening swan comes to roost.'"

The captain almost did a double-take. "The evening swan comes to roost."

"So you know it's me."

"Do you know how often I get messages in the middle of the night on my academy pin, Arrow?"

"No, and I don't assume anything."

For once, Irons gave a genuine smile, and that caught Shiv completely by surprise. The captain's face really wasn't used to the expression. "At least you learned something from my class."

With the day somewhat ruined and unwilling to be ambushed in the dorm again, Adam and Shiv returned to the bathroom, where the Gate Lord fired another arrow. This one led back to the coliseum, and they went across with as much haste as they could. As soon as they arrived, Shiv found himself hounded by Helix immediately, demanding that they start their Biomancy and Practical Metabiology lessons immediately.

"Yeah, look, I'm not blowing you off, Helix. I want to start it soon, frankly. I probably want to start it more than even you do."

"I strongly doubt that," the orc said, adjusting his spectacles. As Adam walked past them, Shiv noticed that Helix refused to make eye contact with the Gate Lord for whatever strange reason. The other orcs snickered at him from behind.

Shiv got the feeling that Helix was undergoing an unusual moment of humiliation. "Look, I'll get back to you as soon as I can, and we can actually get some shit done. Right now—"

"Legend Shiv," Can Hu said, calling out from behind. "Your presence is needed within the Slipgate chamber."

Both Shiv and Adam came to a halt. Helix scoffed. "Oh, good, more distractions from what truly matters."

The first order Shiv had to attend to wasn't Biomancy or even Melissa's evidence. It wasn't even going over the day's events with Adam and the others. No, it was the current state of the Slipgate, the project that Enchanter Merriem and Smith Concelhaunt were working on.

Can Hu was unusually animated regarding the Slipgate. It seemed the Penitent thought there were opportunities there that they could take advantage of. But that wasn't the only reason it seemed excited. The Penitent's body had been mostly restored, and there was an additional layer of material lining its chassis as well. Studs of mithril and lengths of focus crystal formed what appeared to be a skeletal scaffold over the Penitent's spine and limbs. A stream of binary numbers and sloshing smears of unattuned mana glided along the magic-conducting materials.

"So, the Slipgate works?" Adam asked, seeming slightly doubtful, despite everything.

"There is good reason to believe so," Can Hu declared. "So far, they have not managed to open a pathway to the Outside. However, dimensional stabilization and mana threshold diffusion functions are operational."

"There is always some level of discrepancy with the ambient mana thresholds between different realms," Adam explained, noting Shiv's blank stare. "Even between naturally bridged realms connected by a gate, there needs to be a sort of stabilization process, hence the gateways. Sometimes, the dimensional mana necessary is manifested in naturally occurring archways, or ones shaped by the System's hand, depending on what theory you subscribe to. But for artificial gates, there needs to be a finer calibration process. For it is not the System that guides things in these circumstances, but ignorant and fallible individuals."

"So, it's a device that can measure and make sure the ambient mana is equal between places?" Shiv guessed.

"Not quite. More so, one that actively absorbs and displaces ambient mana across locations. Think of it like a scale, except you have some kind of mechanism that is capable of shifting weight from one section of the scale to another."

"Alright, makes sense," Shiv said. "How bad is it if things aren't balanced?"

"Well, you already know. Just drain a bit of vitality from the fabric of the world."

"Oh. Shit."

"Quite."

And as they rounded another section of the maze, Shiv saw that a dimensional rift was already open ahead of them. The stones lining the walls were fractured open in a spiral pattern, resembling a rocky flower in bloom. At the center of the flower was another chamber, a massive one, and the sheer amount of magical energy spilling free from the portal was overwhelming, even for Shiv. It hammered against his Shapeless Tides, and he felt like a man in a full suit of armor walking out to embrace a sky filled with falling hail.

Passing over, the Deathless blinked as he took in the facility that had been constructed. The width of this room was approximately half the size of the Rubix Well's mana core chamber, a few hundred meters from wall to wall. There wasn't a mess of walkways here, and the space was considerably less cluttered. However, there were many panels lining every square meter of the entire chamber, and they glistened with rippling wavelengths of mana. The space was like the inside of a large oval, and Shiv faintly felt a

slight churning motion. The floor was moving beneath his feet, and that's how he noticed that the room was constantly turning as well, like something of an automaton's turbine.

At the center of the room was a hundred-meter-long, inverted obelisk. It was lined with so many magical patterns that he couldn't tell what material it was made out of. It didn't seem like any kind of mithril or focus crystal he knew, and with the way it constantly let out a pitched shriek, he wondered if it had the capability to modulate or manipulate specific mana frequencies.

Hanging beside the large, inverted obelisk were two smaller pyramids. They were dense with mana, each glowing with a kaleidoscope of colors. The hues of a rainbow radiated out from each of them, and as one grew brighter, the other dimmed, and a second later, vice versa.

"Those the magical scales you were talking about?" Shiv breathed.

"That they are," Adam said, equally awestruck. "I've seen smaller ones, but displacers of this size must have cost a fortune, and one small mistake could see all that mana cascade into a cataclysmic overload."

Shiv looked the obelisk up and down once more. At its base, there was another emanation of mana. Pure waves of Dimensionality splashed out from the root, but it was converted to other colors before it could reach the tip.

At the very bottom, the two crafters snarled and barked at each other like rabid animals. The remains of a broken gauntlet hovered between them, and its isolated shape was rattling once more.

"They managed to fix my Magebreaker?" Shiv asked.

"I managed to get it back to an operational state," Can Hu corrected. "They had little experience working with Inertium, though they are more studied of other aspects and sciences."

The Deathless smirked as he regarded his former armor. "Well, guess you showed them. And speaking of, what do you make of those two?"

"Merriemmel is manic. He's driven to see the Slipgate made operational, not only to save his sibling, but also to prove this experiment to be a reality. He's often absent-minded about other things and spends his time obsessing over the finest details of this project. As such, he has a tendency to miss the forest because he's trying to make a perfect tree. Concelhaunt, meanwhile, is driven by guilt. His heart is not entirely in the project, though he is far more pragmatic and efficient in terms of material acquisition."

"And what does that mean, in plain speak?" Adam asked.

"He is likely the one that constantly strikes deals with the Neath," Can Hu explained. "He stepped out earlier to speak to one of the Dragon Brokers' liaisons. They are also deeply interested in this project, and will likely use this as a means to connect their criminal enterprises across Integrated Earth or potentially go beyond the confines of this realm alone. And that is one reason I called you here."

Chapter 220 (II) Slipgate

Adam sighed. "And there it is." He pinched the bridge of his nose once more. "Nothing can be gained without penalty or consequence. We create the Slipgate, we find our way to the outside and save Blackedge, and after that, we also have to contend with the fact that we have helped stabilize a cross-dimensional teleportation network for murderers, smugglers, and worse."

As Adam complained, however, Shiv had narrowed his eyes at the obelisk. "So, this entire room is going to get flooded with Dimensionality when the Slipgate activates."

Can Hu hummed. "That appears to be the case. However, the way it operates is quite ingenious."

"Yeah, I think so too. I'm guessing that the gateway at the heart of the academy is what the base of that obelisk is connected to."

The Penitent's optics flashed twice, signaling confirmation. "Quite so, very astute of you, Legend Shiv."

"Not hard to guess. Since it's tapping into the gateway, that probably means it's using the gate as an in-between door of some kind, doesn't it?"

And that statement caught Adam's attention. "You're right, that would be how it works. We need a source of unending power, and the gate provides. All the crafters need to do here is hide any overt fluctuations or time it to specific spikes coming from within the gate, and most of the activities will be nigh-unnoticeable." But then, the Gate Lord suddenly stopped talking. His eyes darted about.

"Adam, what you got going on in your head?" Shiv asked.

The Gate Lord held up a finger but didn't reply to Shiv. Instead, he stormed over to the crafters. "Concelhaunt, Merrielmel, a word."

Both of them jumped away from each other and whirled around to greet him. The goblin piloting the mechanical chassis briefly clutched his chest. "Damn it, kid, tell us when you're coming in. You're trying to give me a heart attack?"

Adam ignored his complaints. "Is it operational right now?"

Both of them looked up. "What? No, no," Merriemmel said, waving both hands frantically. "If you try to activate it right now, the matter diffusers will undergo a dramatic overload." And then he made a loud explosion noise as he wildly gesticulated just how massive the blast would be.

Shiv guessed that it would kill almost everyone, based on how much the elf was waving his arms around. Too bad for the Ascendants and all the bastards that wanted him dead that he wasn't most everyone. Neither were the other Legends here, for that matter. Hells, he gave Adam even odds by now too. It might just make the Gate Lord turn into a phoenix and slam into several things before he came away with a few burns.

"How long will it take for you to get its base functions activated?" Adam asked

"Base functions?" Concelhaunt repeated. The goblin looked confused.

Adam rolled his eyes. "You're not punching a hole directly into the Outside. I'm not a dedicated crafter, but even I know that. To step beyond the System's reach, you need to use another dimension as a proxy, and then you're springboarding into the Between through all the waste Dimensionality leaking out from the gateway. That means you can tap into other dimensions adjacent to the gate as well, right? And from them, you keep going and get into the Between."

Both of the crafters looked at each other uneasily. Psycho-Cartography activated, and it wasn't that Adam was wrong. It was that they were startled to realize just how much the Gate Lord got right.

Sometimes, being a know-it-all bookworm is pretty cool, Shiv admitted.

"For primary functions to take shape," Merriemmel stammered, "it will still take at least two weeks to a month. And then it will still take more time to test and—"

"I'm not talking about primary functions," Adam hissed. His patience was waning. "I'm talking about the standard functions that a gateway is capable of: connecting one realm to another. Can you connect this to any realm using the Inertium as a stabilizer and with those diffusers? They look functional."

Can Hu's optics narrowed, and something about the Penitent seemed positively giddy.

Alright, what's being planned right now? Shiv wondered.

"Alright, kid, what are you asking us to do?" Concelhaunt muttered, seemingly catching on to Adam's intentions.

Shiv was also trying to figure out what Adam was getting at. But Can Hu was staring hard at the Gate Lord—it already knew.

"I want to do a test run first," Adam said, "as soon as possible. I want this place to be connected to the Tutorial."

Shiv finally realized what Adam was getting at. If they could connect to the Tutorial, then they could get back to Gate Piety as well. There was a gateway linking those two realms. This would allow them to bypass Harlock's notice and reach their allies from Weave, as well as Courtney and the other orcs. Wonder if Bonk and some of the other fallen are already waiting there.

"T-t-t-t-tutorial!" Merrielmel looked like he nearly had a breakdown right then. "You mean the place where the o-o-orcs reside?"

"One of the places," Shiv said, and there was a massive grin on his face now.

Concelhaunt had a deep frown on his face now. "Why the hells would you want to open a place like that?"

Adam looked to Shiv, and the Deathless pointed at himself. "Vaketh-Insul. Also, we have somewhere else we need to get to, and the Tutorial is the quickest way."

"Vaketh!" the goblin sputtered. "Is that why you have a small army of orcs with you?"

"Why else did you think?" Shiv asked, actually curious.

"We just thought they were mercenaries. People hire orc mercenaries sometimes."

Shiv was about to open his mouth, then realized his first two run-ins with orcs had been mercenaries. The goblin had a point.

Concelhaunt clutched his head. "Oh my gods! Our Ascendants! What did we let walk into our own lab?"

"The only reason your experiment might be taking off," Shiv said dryly. "Now, can you do it or not?"

Both of the crafters looked at each other. Merriemel gawked, and Concelhaunt looked like he was having every second thought possible. "It is theoretically, maybe... Can I interest you in another realm?" Concelhaunt coughed. "Anywhere fucking else as a first test."

"No," Adam barked. "Look, if it's any consolation, I don't much want to go to the Tutorial either. I don't want to deal with the orcs—they're bloody maniacs. However, there is a place I need to get to, and there are people I need to help. And ultimately, I have responsibilities. I am a Gate Lord. Thus, I have resources to offer—and a Unique mana core as well. Furthermore, how would you like a place to retreat to and hide from the Capitol's authorities if everything goes south?"

"You're going to be able to protect us?" Concelhaunt asked.

"Again," Shiv replied, "Vaketh-Insul. The orcs will do what I say."

The goblin scoffed. "Yeah, orcs. Obedient. My ass."

"You ever kill an orc?" Shiv asked the goblin.

Concelhaunt blinked. "I, uh..."

"They don't really scream or beg when they die. They always got that smile on their face. But if you pop things inside their soul using Animancy or something else, oh, there's just a little bit of fear, and they get just a bit more human compared to before. They will listen to what I say." Slowly, the fear chain between Shiv and the goblin turned iron-hard.

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Shiv was about to reaffirm the goblin once more, but just then, there came a splash of incandescence from the back of his cape. Shiv grunted in surprise, and Adam noticed it as well. A loud, shrieking cry followed, and Radio tumbled out. Its small body was burning, and it let out a dismayed cry. "Oh, come on, Bossman, don't just take my body like—"

"What are you two doing?" Cripple all but bellowed, manifesting its one-armed form in a flash of ethereal radiance. "What madness am I hearing you spew?"

Both Concelhaunt and Merrielmel shrieked as the ethereal outline of the Ascendant glared down at the offending group of Pathbearers.

"We're trying to find a way to get back to Gate Piety," Shiv said without any hint of fear. "And I need access to the Tutorial to—"

"Right within Phoenix Academy, within the capital itself!" Cripple snarled, ignoring Shiv entirely. With every syllable it spat, its outrage only grew. "Have you no consideration for your actions?"

Shiv held up his hands placatingly. "Listen, I would rather do anything other than open this gateway. However, that requires Harlock to fuck off. Now, is Harlock going to fuck off?"

"No," Adam said, folding his arms. "He is not."

And Cripple turned, glaring at Adam now with its single cyclopean eye. "Him, I can understand. He's reckless. He is the Deathless. But you—"

"But I what?" Adam almost snapped. "I wake up in a prison. A prison which is run by my Ascendants. I wake up, and I realize someone had reached into my mind and defiled my memories. City Lord Stormhalt still remains unpunished for his part in things, I take it?"

"He has been stripped of his right as Avatar," Cripple said with a slight growl. It was clear that the Strongest didn't think that was punishment enough, either.

"Oh, how wonderful!" Adam sneered, sarcasm viscerously thick in his voice. "Stripped of his position, Shiv. Did you hear that? Let us host a gala to celebrate. It's not like his actions caused the death of countless citizens, not even mentioning the ones he directly fed to a Greater Demon. It's not like he led an entire detachment of Inquisitorial agents to sack one of our own towns."

Rage spittle flew free from the Gate Lord's mouth. He pointed up at Cripple, and his fury continued to burn. "You make demands of us. You ask me what I think about the citizens of the Republic—if we care for them at all. I care for them. I do." Adam slammed a fist against his chest piece, and it rang like a gong. "And when the time comes, I will do everything I can to make sure none of them are harmed by what we do. However, I can do nothing to protect them from you. You and the other bastard gods I once worshiped."

A crushing silence followed. Adam staggered a step away from the Ascendant, and Cripple looked upon him no more.

"I believed in you," Adam said, his voice haggard. "I believed in all of you, every single one, despite the Starhawk being our patron god. I wasn't the most faithful, but I cared. I pledged myself to you, to your banner. And look what you've made of me. Look what you've made of us."

Seconds passed, and Cripple didn't say anything. Shiv had his arms folded. Adam hadn't gotten a chance to talk with Cripple in great detail. That moment got derailed by the other Ascendants during their attempt at escaping from the Rubix Well. Now, several things were broken. The prison was obliterated, but even its destruction paled in comparison to how much damage Adam's faith sustained.

"We're going to use whatever means we have now," Adam said. He swallowed, and his face was flushed. He seemed to realize how loud and uncontrolled his outburst had been. "And I've not forgotten the fact that you aided us. That you, alone among all the other Ascendants, decided to intervene. Decided to intervene on our behalf. It's something, but it's not enough. We need every edge we can get."

"Not enough," Shiv said. "But that's why you're here too, Cripple. We're not hiding any of this from you. If you want to propose another idea, or negotiate any terms with the Challenger, you're free to do so. I'll even make introductions, and you can try punching his fat gray head off if you'd like."

The Challenger is looking forward to having a conversation with the so-called Strongest.

A sound of groaning metal signaled Cripple's displeasure. "When you do activate the slipgate, I wish to be here. I wish to be present within Radio. And you two." Cripple's gaze now fell upon the hapless crafters, who clung to each other like children caught by their parent. "To think that you were creating something like this on the grounds of one of our most hallowed institutions. Among those you deem your peers and pupils."

Shiv shot the crafters a brief glance. "Well, yeah, of course they're gonna do it here. The Gate's here, the Neath is sponsoring them. And they have someone they gotta get back. Seems pretty expected to me."

And that drew the Ascendant's ire once more. "Does all this mean nothing to you? Are you unburdened by the risks you place upon the student body here?"

"Not really unburdened," Shiv said. "But the Neath was going for this to begin with. And up until Adam and I showed up, you guys had no idea what was going on." Shiv paused. "Well, most of you probably didn't. I can't put anything beyond Veronica. She seems to be the only one who knows the larger picture. How is my piece of shit of a grandmother, anyway? Did she get my letter?"

"I am not the Councilwoman's minder," Cripple said severely. "But I am yours. The conditions of our prior arrangement remain. I am not only here to prevent you from being abused and used by Udraal Thann. I am also here to prevent you from using and abusing the people of this Republic."

"Yeah, sure, and I'm fine with that," Shiv replied. "But there's one more thing on top of that. We need a private place to do our business, and we need a fortress to hold up in when the System comes to claim

our lives once more. There's a storm coming on the horizon, Cripple. You want to meet with Starhawk? Well, you're already in dangerous territory with your fellow Ascendants. There's probably no easy way to hide inside the capital. Gotta have an alternative spot. That, and... Well, we got some Legendary and Heroic fugitives with us. It's better they end up in the Tutorial and our Gate than sticking around here, right?"

Cripple didn't say anything, which Shiv took as a sign of agreement. "So, are we done here?"

"I wish to be here when the Slipgate activates," Cripple said once more.

"Yeah, yeah, you'll be here, don't worry. And we'll make sure nothing goes wrong for the citizens or the students. Just like we made sure nothing went wrong on campus earlier."

"You mean with the Prophetess," Cripple said. "Yes, I barely stopped myself from intervening then too. That was dangerous, sloppy."

"And they slipped out of your net," Shiv said.

"Our net," Cripple snarled, outraged. "Our net, that was only necessary because someone collapsed the mana core."

Shiv wanted to continue barking his own offenses at the Ascendant. But Psycho-Cartography told him it was a childish and ultimately ineffective way of going about things. "Yeah, you know what, Cripple? Alright, it was close. But you want to know how you can help me make it less so next time? Maybe find a way for me to deal with someone without letting the fight spill over or get noticed by the rest of the city. Your guard was nowhere near catching those four. The Jotun alone could have probably killed everyone

on Academy grounds with her Cryomancy before any of you even noticed what was going on. And if I'm going to continue helping your guys wipe their asses, I can't always be fighting with both hands strapped behind my back."

And to Cripple's credit, he didn't continue complaining either. "I will see what can be done," the Strongest said mutely. A long, tired sigh escaped the Ascendant. "The lockdown will likely persist for a period of three weeks. After that, things get hard. The market will become volatile. The nobility will rebel. And trade will grind to an irreparable halt. Furthermore, there's movement to our south and north as well. The Jotun are mustering, as are the Scarred Ones." And then a beat of silence followed. Cripple seemed hesitant. "We also no longer know where the Tarrasque is."

"You felling what?" both Shiv and Adam cried at the same time.

"How did you lose the Tarrasque?" Shiv snarled. "It's the size of a fucking mountain!"

Cripple groaned awkwardly. "It is the size of a mountain, and it developed... Counter-Divination and several High-Tier Stealth Skills. Suddenly. Without explanation."

Shiv cupped his face, and Adam clutched the sides of his head.

"Udraal!" Shiv snarled. "It has to be fucking Udraal!"